

## After the Upside Down by kupopopoyo

**Series:** [Stranger Things: Differences Adding Up \[2\]](#)

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**Summary:**

The Demogorgon is gone, but things can't go back to the way they were before...

Character centric filler pieces in a story where Barb lives before the events of season 2!

# 1. The First Night After

## Summary for the Chapter:

After the events of [The First Difference](#) - Barb, everyone tries to regroup and makes sense of it all.

## After midnight November 13th 1983

“Oh my god,” Barb whispered, hitting the brakes hard. Jonathan pulled ahead of her Cabriolet before his Ford came to a gentler stop.

“What the hell happened here?” Steve wondered as they took in the field of vans, police cars, and ambulances filling the high school parking lot.

“Mike! Mike, Barb!” Nancy began to panic in earnest.

Barb hit the pedal again, but officers manning a blockade were quick to get in front of the car and signal for her to stop. Grudgingly, Barb did so with a growl of frustration. Barb tried to get out, but an officer already closed in on her driver’s door and signaled, yelling through the glass to pull aside. Barb was tempted to ignore him, but Nancy launching herself out of the car, only to be swarmed by officers, made her acquiesce.

The officers that took them in for custody pulled them away from other rubber-neckers, eyeing their ragged clothes, odd bruises and wounds, and demanded their guns. Nancy, and, in short order Barb, began arguing with them at the top of their lungs demanding to know what happened to Mike when the officer detaining them turned back. Powell stepped around him to give the teens an up and down that instantly silenced them. He raised an eyebrow but murmured to the officer in the sudden silence to “let them in.”

He pulled aside the officer, talking to him in a low voice that kept them from eavesdropping, but twitched his fingers at the teens to get in and pointed their gazes to the back of an ambulance where Flo and Callahan sat with the kids in a silent row.

“Mike!” Nancy cried out with heartfelt relief as she ran at her little brother and pulled him into a hug.

Callahan whistled. “What the hell happened to you lot? Ouch,” he hissed as Flo cinched the fresh bindings on his arm tighter.

“Demogorgon,” Barb whispered softly. “We killed it.”

“That was some disappearing act you pulled,” Flo was drily saying at the same time, before her head snapped up again. “What?” She said, echoing Dustin and Callahan’s own confused question.

“We killed it,” Barb repeated simply, feeling freer than she had all week knowing that the Demogorgon’s corpse was burning in the pyre that was once Steve’s house.

Steve jostled Jonathan’s side, all friendly. “We even got a picture. Didn’t come back till we were sure the body was burned.” The other boy held up the camera around his neck with a tight, humorless smirk.

Callahan and Flo traded troubled looks as Lucas sighed, “No you didn’t, El killed the Demogorgon, we saw it right here!”

“Yeah,” Dustin chimed in, “There was this flash of light and they were both gone.”

“Oh Mike, she’s gone?” Nancy whispered sadly. Then her brain caught up. “What do you mean she killed the Demogorgon, we blew it up!”

“I’m sorry, you what now?” Flo sat down hard and boggled at them as Barb raised a finger to her temple.

“Blew what up?” Powell strolled up from behind them. “Steve! You blew up your house? Is that why it’s on fire?” Callahan spluttered and the kids all watched the teen boy in curious shock.

“It’s on fire,” Steve said measuredly, trying to comprehend what was going on, “because we dropped the roof on the Demogorgon and burned the body to make sure it was dead.”

“We watched it with our own eyes,” Barb added, not liking where this conversation was going and the confused looks the adults were sharing.

“But we saw El disappear with the Demogorgon,” Dustin argued, just as fiercely confused. “And she’s not with you, so you couldn’t have killed the Demogorgon.”

“Excuse me?” Barb asked, rage coolly simmering on her skin as she fixed Dustin with a fierce look that, for once, failed to dissuade the boy and they entered an impromptu staring match of wills.

“It’s true though,” Powell’s voice was miserable. “El and the Demogorgon vanished an hour ago. Once this circus appeared, we’ve been here since.”

Barb chewed on a nail, as Steve stepped forward, “But...we killed the Demogorgon an hour ago.” His jubilant glee was ashen. “This...this doesn’t make any sense.”

Brain in overdrive, Nancy knew that this was impossible, leaving only the improbable. “Unless there were two,” Nancy pointed out, feeling faint. “And if there were two Demogorgons...”

“Where’s my mom?” Jonathan snapped, eyes blazing.

Powell and Flo exchanged worried glances. “Hopper hasn’t – “

“Excuse me.” The group turned on a federal agent who meekly stepped forward. Powell turned on him with a fierce look that caught the man off guard. “Uhm...Police Chief Hopper said he requests your presence at Hawkins General Hospital.”

Jonathan bolted first, straight through the barricade and for his car. The other teens followed quickly. Barb lingered long enough to throw her keys at Flo while Steve caught up to grab onto Jonathan and Nancy talked him down fast. They got him to cooperate eventually, but it was with Steve at the driver’s seat of the Ford as Powell and Nancy got in the back with Jonathan sandwiched between them.

“Right,” said Barb stiffly as she buckled herself into the passenger’s seat. “Hospital, Steve.” She felt...weird. Floaty and loose as if this

was all a waking dream.

“You better step on it,” Nancy warned, concern at the stony expression on Jonathan’s face.

When they stepped into the lobby, another agent intercepted Jonathan on the way to the front desk and handed him a piece of paper, speaking just at a whisper. Jonathan’s snapped to attention at the agent’s quiet words and then turned, mechanically for the elevator. When doing so revealed the rest of them, the agent sighed and waved them on to follow Jonathan, holding back the irate receptionist who sat down again with a huff.

One look at Jonathan tightlipped and eyes filling with tears kept Flo, not ungently, hushing Dustin’s questions. When they unloaded out of the elevator, Hopper, was stepping out of a room not far away. He saw them, raised a finger to his lips with a wince, and said, “Jonathan only for now.” No one argued, or rather no one was willing to as he let Jonathan pass by without so much as a nod. Hopper’s right arm was in a sling, gauze wrapped around his head and more peeked out from the ragged remnants of his uniform jacket. He looked a mess.

Instead, the group meekly waited as he took an orderly aside and the man guided them to a small break room. There, the man went to a closet and came out with extra gauze and disinfectant with a meaningful look for the battle-worn teenagers before closing the door quietly behind the odd group.

“What happened to you? Is Joyce still alive?” Powell asked point blank. Flo itched to check on Hop, but he looked cleaned up all things considered. There wasn’t much else she could do. Instead she occupied herself with cutting strip of gauze as she distracted herself with thoughts of cleaning the scabbing cut on Barb’s brow.

“What? Oh, yeah, no. Joyce is fine. We, uhm, we found Will Byers,” Hopper announced gruffly.

As would have been expected, everyone started asking questions, and

it took Powell, banging on the table and bellowing “QUIET!” to regain some level of calm.

“He’s alive. Recovering. Joyce and now Jonathan’s with him. He woke up when we found him, but he needs rest now.” He held up a hand and managed to catch Dustin by the sleeve with a pained grunt when the boy tried to run back out the door. “No. Family only right now. Give them a moment.” Dustin pouted but nodded as he sat back down with the others. Hopper’s eyes were on Powell as he commanded, “What’ve you got to report?”

Powell took a breath, trying to find the best way to say this. “Well, we got one. Maybe two? Demogorgons down.” He trailed off, waiting for the Chief’s reaction.

Hopper blinked, but didn’t look quite as surprised at this news as the others expected, just nodding a little. “Two of them? Would explain how so many people went missing.”

“Wait, you knew?” Callahan spluttered, outrage warring with shock.

Hopper just shook his head. “It was...well...” he fell silent and stared at his hands flat on the table.

“Chief Hopper?” Barb asked, concerned.

The man sniffled, and then dabbed at his eyes. “That other place...the uhm...downside.

“Upside Down.” Dustin corrected. Flo glared at him, but Hopper just nodded.

“The Upside Down. There’s...a lot in there.”

He began recounting how he and Joyce stepped through to the other side. The strange eggs they found that brought to mind memories to the teenagers of their own visit to the Upside Down. “There were things there. More of them. More Demogorgons,” Hopper admitted at last. The others took a deep breath at once. “I don’t know how many. But we passed at least three. They were fighting these...things. At the library. Only reason we were able to get Will in and out.” He took a breath. “Problem is, the...things they were fighting...” He trailed off.

Powell was the one to break the tense silence. "Chief. What were they fighting?"

Hopper came to with a start. "Right. Best I can say is." He sighed, opened and closed his mouth a few times then shook his head. "This is going to sound crazy. They were these giant eyeball face things. " Barb noticed Dustin lean in, not liking the fascinated glitter in those eyes. "The legs were clawed, sharp," he waved at himself "that's what cut me up. Problem wasn't the claws. It was...when you look at its eye."

"Beholder," Dustin whispered, excited.

Barb cuffed the boy as Powell and Flo sighed. "This isn't a game Dustin," the young woman snapped, her patience well worn out.

"Sorry." For once the boy immediately apologized and spread his fingers at Hopper as if to say the stage was his again.

The Chief did not look happy about it. "It made me – us, see things. Horrible things." He licked his lips. "Joyce was the one who saved us. Broke the things hold on her and ran it right through. Took a while to get me out of it. We found Will...and." He sighed. "The other bodies behind them. All the others looked...well...eaten..." Hopper admitted softly.

Everyone jumped as Steve pushed back his chair with a shriek of metal and went straight out the door. Nancy got up to follow with Barb only a step behind.

Powell glanced around the room, then got to his feet. "Chief, let's take five." Hopper nodded, still staring at his hands as the kids broke out in whispers just before the door closed behind Powell. He didn't have to go far to see Barb and Nancy outside the men's room. Barb looked torn between running in there and patting Nancy on the back. The other girl looked green and queasy as she hugged herself. Then Barb looked down the hall and waved Powell over. "I'm guessing he's in there?" She nodded to him and Powell sighed.

Inside, there was only one stall closed, and not hearing or seeing anything but sniffing, Powell went up and tapped the stall door with

a knuckle. "Steve." There was no answer, he didn't expect one. What do you say after the bomb Hopper dropped on them? I'm sorry your childhood friend got munched by a Demogorgon? "Steve, you're not alone here. Everyone's here for you." After another long silence he added, "It's alright to cry son. You take your time. You did good tonight son, I hope you know that. Above and beyond the call of duty." With no further response, he added lamely, "You're a good friend."

Powell left it at that and had just leaned up against the wall to wait Steve out or if the boy needed anything when the door opened. Steve came out, still a teary red-eyed mess and then grabbed him into a hug, burying his face in Powell's chest. "Uhm, there, there kid." Powell tried to remember how his sister might handle this kind of situation as he mechanically patted Steve's back. "It's going to be ok." Steve didn't respond, but he did cling tighter, tears still streaming down his face as he squeezed his eyes shut tight and just shook.

With Nancy and Barb on either side, Steve resolutely returned to the room a while after Powell went back.

"So they made you see dead things?" Dustin was asking, wonder in his voice again. "Ow!"

"Give it a rest already Dustin." Lucas mumbled. His eyes flicked to the still silent Mike and Dustin shut up.

Hopper looked away to Steve, seemingly glad for any distraction from Dustin. "You ok, kid?"

Steve looked far from it, but with his hands tightening around Barb and Nancy's he nodded. His caught Powell's gaze as the older man sat down and said "Getting there."

Hopper nodded. "It takes time. When you lose people. Sometimes you never get over it." Softer, he added, "That's ok, kid. One day at a time. And none of the macho bullshit. Ask or talk to us if you need it." More bleakly he met Steve's eyes. "Don't end up like me," he warned.



No one quite expected that, but Steve took it in stride and nodded. "You too Chief."

Hopper looked down. At last he cleared his throat. "So uh...where's El now? The agents get her?"

Any calm in the room immediately fled. Everyone glanced to one another around Hopper's confused looks to see who would try and explain.

Powell sighed, "So it's like this..."

At some point, Steve took Dustin's backpack, disappeared and then came back with it filled with what had to be nearly an entire vending machine's contents. Hopper noticed the boy's vanishing act line up with the point that it was Nancy and Barb's turn to recount the teen's night, but kept that to himself. Mike was miserably huddled under Nancy's jacket and dozing next to her. Dustin, the little hellion, was following everyone's story, recording it in some notebook, even asking follow up questions that, more often than not, asked precise details that few people thought hard enough to remember. Not even the temptation of snacks kept Dustin from his notetaking despite the hour. He did take several candy bars though. Even now, he bit into one, holding it with his teeth as he scribbled notes about Barb's account of using a propane tank to blow up the Harrington residence.

"And that's how we killed our Demogorgon," Barb said softly. "Sorry, no magical lightshow." Hopper snorted amusement at least.

Dustin finished jotting something down, then jumped to his feet. "Bathroom," he squeaked, "I've been holding it for the last hour."

Flo huffed with her eyes closed, a sign that she hadn't nodded off quite yet. She may have been getting older on in her years, but after a lifetime of unpredictable shifts and caring for a disabled husband's adjustment pains, she still had enough spirit in her to say to him, "You didn't actually have to tell us that," in her most matronly manner.

When the door slipped close. Silence fell, like sleep upon Callahan

who rested his head on Powell's shoulder. The older officer was doing his best to work the kinks out of his neck without disrupting his wounded partner's rest. With Nancy dozing into Steve's side now, it seemed that they were about to call it a night.

Barb was reaching for a bottle of water when Steve's question gave her pause. "Hey Chief? What did that eyeball thingy make you see?" Flo's eyes popped open and Powell shot the boy a warning glare. When Hopper turned to Steve, the older boy added, "You said a lot of weird stuff tonight. If there's more of those eyeballs out there like the Demogorgon's, I want to be prepared."

Hopper turned his fierce gaze on Steve, but the boy just returned it evenly so Hopper was the one to give in. "...it showed me some of the worst moments of my life, no. Nightmares."

"So it made you fall asleep?"

"Not...exactly. Didn't feel like a dream, but...I guess they weren't memories. Realistic shit, I'll tell you that. Movie special effects got nothing on it."

"So, what did you see?"

Powell glanced at Hopper watching for a sign to tell Steve to back off. Hopper only got this shaken up over one thing these days. After a day like this, Powell was sure he could talk Steve out of this, but Hopper nodded slowly. "I guess, if you saw it, maybe you'd see Carol." Steve tensed as Hopper glanced down at the long-since drained cup of coffee the boy had brought him. "It showed me my dead daughter Sarah. And all sorts of horrible things that could have happened to her. And all I could do was watch."

Powell closed his eyes, and slumped, whispering apologies to the jostled Callahan. Somewhere to his left, he heard Flo recite another prayer under her breath. After a moment, Steve sucked in air like he just remembered to breathe and said softly, "Oh." For a moment, there was nothing but the ambience of people sleeping and the muffled call of a request on the intercoms from the other side of the door. Finally Steve asked, "It's not over yet, is it?"

## **2. The First Day After**

### **Summary for the Chapter:**

Callahan struggles with the first day of work back at the police station.

### **Saturday November 13th**

Callahan was tired. First thing that morning, when he, Powell, and Hopper went out of the hospital, a car with an unmarked license plate drove up alongside them, opening its door. When Powell tried to follow a resigned Hopper inside, the agent made him, in no uncertain terms, unwelcome. Callahan ended up following Powell, ignoring the older man's increasingly blunt suggestions that he should take the day off.

After the incident last night, the order to kill them all by that woman agent left Phil unnerved and more paranoid than ever. It was one thing to expect that kind of callous lawlessness – hearing it with his own ears as the threat to his life unfolded and spiraled out of control was something else entirely.

“Penny for your thought,” Powell rumbled as they pulled into the police station.

“You’re a workaholic,” Callahan shot back, the painful aches in his limbs making the joking words curt. He would not give Powell the satisfaction of “I told you so,” so he forced himself at a hobble to keep up as Powell lightly slapped his elbow.

“I thought you didn’t do the macho stuff,” Powell’s voice was low.

Callahan paused. It wasn’t often that Powell called him out at the station. “Just copying you oh fearless leader,” he winked, hoping that took away from the perspiration already shining at his temples.

Powell gave him a look. It wasn’t quite scolding, but it wasn’t a gentle reproach. At the door, they parted for one of the last night patrolmen signing out. “Crazy night, eh?” the man muttered as

Powell painted a small smile on his face. Callahan saw it didn't reach his partner's eyes letting the man pass with a small bob.

"You care too much about manners," Callahan told him once the other officer was out of earshot, "You're deputy chief now, Powell. Only Hopper outranks you."

Powell still double checked no one was around and kept voice low as he reminded Callahan, "Not in Hawkins, Indiana." He swept by Callahan in the same breath, not willing to argue further and the younger man let the argument drop.

The station was a mess. Half filled paperwork littered every surface along with the station's sparse few supplies for handling anything more unruly than domestic abuse. To say the disappearances and the showdown at the high school caught the Hawkins PD off guard was a massive understatement. And without the Chief, Powell, or even Flo there to manage things, a small mountain of paperwork had formed on Powell's desk. With Hopper off the grid the last few days, Powell had to bear the brunt of that work and he took only one look at the mess before turning right around and going to set a fresh pot of coffee to brew. Callahan plucked one sheet off the pile and cringed. All-too-often, the other officers got in the habit of half-assing their paperwork when they knew Powell had to handle it. It wasn't to say that Hopper got their best work, but Powell practically had to rewrite the reports for the other officers when they landed on his desk.

Callahan turned to see Powell brace himself on the counter, drooping his head with a sigh as he scratched his head. Without a word, Callahan picked up a good chunk of the paperwork, carried it back to his desk, and scrounged for a pen.

By noon, Callahan and Powell were joined by Flo, and Flo alone. They worked quietly. There was a lot of paper work and, after last night, it seemed to be settled by unspoken agreement that keeping the sensitive bits out of the others officers' hair would work for the best. After long years of relative peace and calm, the other officers were on edge and complaining, not used to pointed questions and angry complaints about missing persons cases that went nowhere.

Flexing his fingers, Callahan was annoyed to find a blister developing and threw his pen down with a sigh. "Did we really pull in everyone to lock down the scene last night?"

Powell paused midway in his writing and glanced around the practically empty room. "Had to fill in the night shift somehow. No way just Jeffers and Limburgh were going to be enough."

Flo grunted sympathetically. "So what are we going to tell them once things settle?"

Callahan looked up as Powell tapped at the side of his head with a pen. Hawkins had gained a reputation for being one of the state's softer posts. There was a reason Callahan, Powell, and Flo were willing to give Hopper the benefit of the doubt and work under him instead of their more unctuous, ambitious coworkers. They would need a good cover story for the last week.

"Let's hope Hopper and those suits that picked him up can come up with a plan," the older officer sighed. He set aside the file for the other high school student among the victims. Thankfully, no children aside from Will had been taken. The vast majority were adults. Even so, Powell would dread speaking to Dr. Perkins and the Thompsons in particular after all this.

After a moment, Flo sighed. "What's wrong Phil? Need something to do?" she asked piercingly. "Come help me with these overtime forms." She rubbed at her forehead as Callahan ducked his head. Coffee could only do so much after last night. The four or five hours of rest she squeezed in between checking on her husband and filling him in on the absolute shitshow that unfolded yesterday was not nearly enough for the last week. Flo was twenty years too old for that kind of strain and she felt it now as her body totaled up pains and aches with her throbbing joints.

Gallantly, she finished one last sheet. "Alright. Please tell me you boys want some lunch because I am very much done with paperwork for now."

"Please" Callahan said and, outnumbered, Powell set his pen down and stood with a groan.

Flo had just called in for a sandwich delivery when the door opened.

“Grub’s here? Already?” Callahan looked up from the puzzle he swiped off another officer’s desk. “Talk about fast delivery!”

Hopper rounded the corner and poked his head into the room, bags under his eyes pronounced. “Anyone else here?”

“Chief!” “Hop!”

They shuffled into his office, patiently waiting for Hopper to go over the lights and the hidden spots. Satisfied his office, at least, was clean, Hopper sat down in his chair with a heavy sigh.

“So...the Department of Energy is going to be coming forward to work with us as long as we keep the down low on the demiglazed thing this past week.”

Flo nodded along as he spoke, but Callahan’s mouth quirked. “Have you eaten anything since yesterday Chief?”

Hopper fixed him with unimpressed, reddened eyes. “You can get me a coffee now Callahan.”

By the time Callahan went to fetch the lunch delivery at the front door, they had already come to an understanding of the arrangements. Hopper would stick close to the Byers and do his best to supervise the lab in case they tried anything more suspicious with the proposed check ups on Will Byers. Powell and Callahan’s patrols would be widened and they would get in periodic touch with pest control and state troopers. Nobody was happy about that, given O’Bannon’s involvement with the Byers case, but everyone agreed they needed every edge they could get with how the Demogorgons could freely surface anywhere they choose. The way it came out of the wall at the high school last night still unnerved the three who had seen it burst through plaster and concrete. At the moment, Flo had too much paperwork to get through, but she agreed to put together something on the kids, young and teens alike, to keep an eye on them. She would be starting with the Harrison kid seeing as someone was going to have to call his parents and make an official report to them. Then Hopper dumped the box he dragged in with him on the

desk and looked them all in the eyes wearily.

Officially Hawkins Police did not know what caused nearly 14 people to disappear over the last week of November. Records would be sealed and handed over to the feds who would be visiting each of the affected families to negotiate compensation and silence. Unofficially, officers outside of Hopper would have to refer anything involving the lab to the Chief who would be the only one authorized to negotiate with the lab. Powell and Callahan were given special dispensation to assist Hopper with securing anti disclosure forms and charged with enforcing them over all the civilians involved last night, of which Flo would be one. They spent their lunch break over copies of their own agreements, each of which was a pile larger than could be fit in any one folder.

Callahan handed over his own lunch to Hopper after skimming through his agreement the first time. The level of secrecy and deceit they would be agreeing to be complicit to was mind boggling. The fact that his had an exoneration for the death of a federal agent with the name blacked out drove away his appetite pretty quickly and, in short order, he stepped out of the office for a spell.

Powell watched him go, concerned as Flo and Hopper conferred about what to do with her husband, whose lack of papers seemed conspicuous. After a moment, he excused himself and followed the sound of retching from the bathroom.

He was really starting to hate spending time in bathrooms.

After the sound of flushing, Callahan emerged from a stall, pale and sweating. He stumbled as he caught sight of Powell with a muttered, "Jesus."

"You ok, kid?"

That earned him the evil eye from the younger cop bent over the sink to wash his hands. After gargling and spitting, Callahan took a breath. He was trying to dispel the afterimage of the grim rosette of blood and gore that his bullet had made of the federal agent's head back at the junkyard. "Yup." His bile-sore throat made his voice harsh as a crow's. "Just another day on the force."

### **3. The First Week After**

#### **Summary for the Chapter:**

The first week after the Demogorgon's from Barb's point of view

#### **Monday September 14th**

“So...there’s no school today.”

Barb blinked, torn out of distracted thoughts as she stared at her father. He usually left a good bit before she did as his office was a further drive to the other side of town. Usually he would have his meal, kiss her mother and then be out the door before 7:30. She could set her watch to how consistent he was. Barb felt herself tense, sharp awareness settling in with fear that her parents were on to her. She sat on pins and needles as her father set aside his breakfast plate and her mother slipped into her chair so they both faced her.

“Barb,” her mother began. Then she faltered, looking down until her father placed his hand on hers.

“We’ve been very worried about you these last few days,” he began slowly, as if she would spook and run.

Barb steadied her resolve and swallowed a snort. It wasn’t easy leaving the others and trying to remember the person she had been before the Demogorgon attacked. “I’m sorry,” she opted for the apology, trying to make it sound sincere and forcing herself to look her father in the eye.

He looked away first.

“I understand that tensions have been high. Especially with Nancy and that...new boyfriend of hers.” Her father was testing the waters, and, as she nodded, he pushed on. “Given the exceptional circumstances, your mother and I agree that putting the past few days behind us would be better for everyone. No need to make people talk.”



Barb blinked, swallowing the urge to laugh as she realized that, once again, her parents were more concerned with their image as the Hallmark perfect midwestern family than the lethal mystery that claimed fourteen lives the last week.

“We’ll forget this ever happened,” her father continued, blissfully ignorant to the thoughts storming in Barb’s mind. “But we want you to come to us next time there’s any trouble.”

“We don’t want you to end up like Nancy,” her mother sighed. “Such a sweet girl, what happened?”

Barb thought of the way Nancy had faced down the Demogorgon with a gun in either hand and a peace settled over her. “Mike was upset about Will,” she found herself saying. “Nancy didn’t know what to do with herself and she needed to get away from home for a bit.”

From the way her parents traded looks, she knew what they were thinking. It wasn’t a big secret that Ted and Karen Wheeler’s relationship was tepid at best. Her parents certainly liked to gossip and tsk about it when they thought she and Nancy weren’t listening and of course that’s what they would fixate on. Barb was glad she was proving to be far subtler than either of them. Pretending to not notice that exchange, she pressed on, “I wasn’t thinking right last time I came home, but I’m sorry for making you worry...really.”

Her mother let out a rattling breath and nodded. “Oh, Barb. You’re alive, that’s all that matters.”

“Oh,” Barb did feel a little smaller at that. “You heard about Carol?”

“And the other girl,” her father sighed. Seeing her face, he nodded. “You hadn’t heard? Two girls at your school are missing.” Barb’s mouth formed an "O" as her thoughts raced.

“School’s been cancelled for today. I’ve got work, but Barb? You’ll talk to us right? If you need something?” Barb nodded, feeling unsteady as she tried to think of who else could have gone missing. Ally?

“Of course, Dad,” she answered as her father waited for a response.

He frowned slightly, but nodded as he hefted himself out of his seat. "Well, your mother will be here if you need to talk about anything Barb."

"Anything," her mother repeated with more force than Barb had heard in sometime. Finally, the older woman looked up. "You gave us a scare Barbie girl. Let's not fight like that ever again."

The long-unused nickname caught her off guard. And the fear and concern in her mother's eyes were real. Barb really did scare them something fierce when she disappeared last week, didn't she?

...how would they have handled it if she had been the one to go missing?

Once her father left, Barb took her time with breakfast, trying to ignore how mother kept peeking out from the kitchen to watch her like Barb would vanish into thin air. It wasn't until she was about to go back to her room, that she remembered. Bringing the plate to the kitchen, she asked her mother to use the kitchen for a moment, then left carrying a stacked plate to her room.

## **Tuesday September 15th**

Barb switched the TV off and got up. "Mom," she called out. It was getting easier, pretending to be a normal girl and keeping her secrets under wraps. The fact that her parents were keeping their distance helped.

"Still closed?" her mother called back from the kitchen.

"Yup." Barb called Hopper last night and he had told her that school would be shut down for a few days. Apparently, the agents wanted to study the hole the Demogorgon came through. "I'm calling Nancy!"

"Okay honey, just finish before eleven so I can call Mrs. Lovell! I need to know when the bridge group is meeting this tomorrow!"

Barb grabbed the telephone from the hall, making sure the line didn't catch on anything as she dragged it into her room. They were making cordless phones these days, didn't that sound nice? Nicer than making sure the phone didn't catch on the bureau outside her door as

she rang the number and closed the door. “Hey Chief? Any good news?” she rapped a knuckle on her closet door then froze. “Wait, he can’t stay with them anymore? Why not?”

Barb almost missed the sound of her mother coming down the hall over her music and slammed the closet door shut. “Barb? You ok?” her mother asked, the sound of it drawing her into the room in a hurry.

“Yup. Is it time for dinner?”

After a moment, she nodded, “Your father’s on the way. Can you set the table?”

Barb quickly stood, “Of course.”

Her father was in a good mood as her mother set out plates of lasagna and placed a beer on the table in front of him with a kiss. “- I tell her, sure. We can get some contractors out to inspect the wall and get some repairs done. After she hangs up though, some inspector from the national government calls in and says they want to cover the project. Can you imagine?”

“Sounds like a lucky break,” her mother hummed as she sat down. Barb sweat, trying to gather her thoughts.

“A really lucky one, given she’s the only one for those two boys.”

Her mother nodded and looked to Barb expectantly. Falling back into the rhythms of their life, Barb took her turn to say grace. The lasagna was good, one of her favorites normally, but the noodles felt like greasy cardboard as she swallowed. At last, talk of her father’s work lulled. Barb set down her fork and cleared her throat.

“Hey, uhm dad?”

“Yes Barb honey?”

“Are there any places in town that, uhm...do you still do skeet shooting?”

Her mother's fork scraped along her plate as she looked from Barb to her father and back.

He set his own silverware down. "Not lately honey. Why? No one's been giving you any problems have they?" his eyes glittered.

In the end, she half-shrugged. "Not really, but after the last few days...I've started to think that...whatever happened to those girls at school. I don't want it to happen to me." She looked down at her plate, not trusting herself to hold up a good enough poker face to throw her parents off.

After a moment, she peeked up to see her father and mother throwing each other glances, ending as her mother nodded stiffly. Her father leaned in. "Barb. Let me be clear. Are you asking me to teach you how to use guns?"

The moment of truth, Barb nodded, silent.

Her mother looked down at her lap, sitting like she was wringing her hands under the table. "It's not very ladylike at all," she whispered to the silent dining table. Her father shifted in his seat, but she continued, "But, I'd hate to think of you hurt more. Earl? Surely you know someone who can teach her?"

Her father clamped his mouth shut and sat back, looking surprised. Then he nodded. "I could. The Harris's say there's a girl on the skeet team in Terra Haute. It'd be perfectly safe with me there, Marsha." Her father was excited, Barb realized. He spent a lot of time reminiscing about his time shooting and hunting, it stood to reason.

The trick was her mother, but she was already nodding along to her father's words. "Anything that'll keep her safe," she conceded unhappily.

Her father turned back, an excited smile that faded a bit as he saw the serious, tense expression on Barb's face. He reached out and squeezed her hand. "Don't worry Barb, I'll teach you. Nothings going to get you like those girls on my watch."

Barb forced a small smile on her face as her father picked up his fork,

only to get sidetracked outlining what they'd need to get Barb a license for a handgun by the time she qualified at eighteen. Her mother didn't cluck about it like she usually did when he talked guns around Barb. Instead, she hung on to his words with a rapt attention and focus she normally reserved for other ladies' fashions at church event sales.

That had gone rather well, surprisingly. Barb took a breath and readied herself. "There's one more thing, a friend of mine lost his house. Do you think, he could stay with us here for a bit?"

"He?" Her mother and father both leaned forward, looking ready to pounce.

"Since when did you get a boyfriend?" her father gave her a suspicious look.

"Uhm," Barb tried to back peddle.

Her mother's lips were pursed in tight disdain. "Why would you even suggest such a thing?"

"Because, mother, it's the right thing to do." Barb took a breath to force herself to stay calm and not invite fresh criticism over her tone. She composed herself, only letting the clenching of her hands tighter under the table betray her façade. "Steve lost everything in that fire, and his parents won't be home for at least another day."

"Steve? Steve Harrington?" The table rattled slightly as her mother sat up straight. "That boy Nancy was seeing? And why would it be any concern of ours what happens to that hooligan?"

Her father's mustache quivered, unimpressed. "Best we can tell, he blew his house up himself."

"And then there's that missing girl that always hung around him," Barb's mother added quickly, breathlessly. "Still haven't found her and it's been nearly a week. Something's not right there."

Barb took a deep breath to steady her voice. "Which is why we should be helping Steve out in this time of need. He's hurt and still missing his friend. Then he loses everything in a fire. He needs us to

step up and show him support as right proper Christians should.” God, Barb could hardly believe the day had come where she was trotting out the platitudes to her parents. Before she came down, Barb had practiced the lines in a mirror over and over, repeating the lie of omission to herself until she could look her reflection in the eye and tell it convincingly.

### **Wednesday November 16th**

“Meatloaf is in the fridge for lunch! I’ll be back before dinner. I also bought more Eggos since you’ve been eating so many of them lately.”

“Thanks mom,” Barb called as brightly as she could. Then the front door slammed shut and she waited at the door to her room until she heard her mother borrow the Cabriolet and head out of the driveway. Then she made a beeline for the phone to make the call.

Half an hour later, the truck pulled up to her driveway. Barb had the door open before Hopper could even knock. “Chief. Steve!” Barb leapt out to grab the lanky boy in a hug. “How are you?”

“Eeeehhh,” he wavered, but hugged Barb back just as eagerly all the same. “...kinda miss Nancy.”

Hopper hovered at the edge of their vision, so Barb nodded at him and jerked her head back. “My room. Left and the third door on the left.” To Steve, she asked, “Did something happen at Nancy’s?” as she led him to the living room.

“Not really? Just, her mom and dad weren’t a fan of me staying in Nancy’s room.”

“But they kicked you out!” Barb sighed, “You’re not mad about that?”

The boy just shrugged. “Don’t really blame ‘em. And Hop said he’s got a place in the woods I can stay at for a bit.”

Barb glanced at the backpack he wore. “Did you manage to get anything after the fire?” her voice soft.

Steve just shook his head. It was weird seeing him without the coif. His bangs were just long enough to get in his eyes that he kept trying

to brush them aside. After losing his house, she wasn't surprised that this was down the ladder of priorities. It was just sad in a way she wished she were more helpful. "Nah. Just the stuff I grabbed when we ran for it the first time."

Barb nodded and a lull fell over them. In it, she gathered herself enough to say, "Sorry Steve." At the curious look he sent her, she pointed out, "It was my idea to blow up the propane tank."

His brow furrowed and then he waved her comment off. "It killed the Demogorgon, that's what matters."

"Still, it's gotta suck losing everything like that," she whispered. She blinked as Steve snorted.

"Yeah, no I got everything important out the first time. Most of it," Steve told her. There was a mischievous gleam in his eyes as he zipped open the bag and rummaged through for something. "You think I'd leave Mr. Bearington Harrington where the Demogorgon could get him?"

"Mr. who now?" Barb shook with laughter as she reached out and gently took the aged stuffed bear. "I never pegged you for a stuffed animal kind of boy, Steve."

He gave her an amused look. "Uhm, don't you remember how I asked Nance out?"

She blinked and then recalled the stuffed bat from the school's Halloween raffle. "Now you've told me your weakness Mr. Harrington, you'll never live it down."

He just smiled at her and took Mr. Bearing Harrington back. "It was nice at Nancy's, though. You know, with her parents being so nice and worried about her."

Barb blinked. "Say what now, Steve? Are we talking about the same Karen and Ted Wheeler I'm thinking about?"

"Uhm," he sighed and looked away.

Sensing she stepped on a landmine, she changed the topic. "I tried

asking my parents to let you stay.”

Steve gave her a warm smile at that. “Yeah, thanks. Hop told me.”

“Sorry, I couldn’t convince them,” Barb sighed. She thought if they were willing to let her take up gun practice, Steve might have had a shot.

“It’s fine, Barb. Thanks for trying though.”

After a moment, she added, “Did you just call the chief ‘Hop?’”

“All the cops at the station called him that and he didn’t seem to mind...”

She glanced at the backpack and shook her head. “All of this is making me think of Hopper like a stuffed bear too.”

Steve chuckled. “Please say it to his face. I want to see his look.”

“Barb?” Hopper’s voice drifted out from the back. “A little help?”

Barb gave Steve a look and got up. “Duty calls,” she said as he nodded and followed.

### **Thursday November 17th**

“Excuse me, is Chief Hopper here?” A head flew up from a desk and Barb blinked. “Uhm, Cal-Calhoun?”

“Callahan,” the officer corrected with a yawn. No one else was in the office, but Flo had told her it was fine to just come in after school. He leered at her, “Now, what’s a pretty - oh. No one’s here?” He looked around and Barb shook her head. “You’re the Holland girl right?” His tone of voice completely different.

Baffled, she nodded nonetheless, “Barb.” After a moment she added, “You look better. You know. Than the other day.”

He made a face. “Bullet wounds suck. And I’m so tired,” he mumbled. “But if anyone asks, never shot nothing last weekend, ok?”



Barb thought back to the stack of paperwork Hopper left on her desk the day before and nodded. Reading it was dull, tedious work that made her eyeballs dance, but she was going to force herself through as much of it as she could. For the matter at hand, she asked, "Is Flo here?"

"Probably. Off in the back or something," Callahan started to get to his feet, before his bad leg buckled and he caught himself on the desk with a "whoops."

"Uhm, is there anything I can do..." Barb began only for him to wave it off. "Right."

After a moment of awkwardly staring at each other, Callahan asked, "You here for the Chief or Flo? Cause you asked for both."

"Either?" she hedged nervously. She wasn't sure who else was in the know yet, and she was starting to get the feeling Hopper's paranoia was just getting petty at this point after everything they had gone through.

"This about his houseguest?"

"Uh, yeah. Actually, Steve didn't show up at school today...do you know...?"

Callahan nodded, "My guess is that the school told him to stay at Hop's. Doc Perkins is on the warpath you know? Trying to put a lawsuit on Steve."

Barb's jaw dropped. "You're joking," she prompted after a moment of boggling at the man.

Callahan winced and bounced around the small station with numb legs. At another desk, he fished out a sheaf of papers, took a look around, and then handed it to Barb.

She flipped through the first few pages and felt a spark of anger catch. "Traumatic...damages? Suspicious behavior? This is bullshit! No one worked as hard to find Carol as Steve did!" At school, Tommy was already starting to badmouth Steve and spread rumors. Some of them included Barb, Jonathan, Nancy in some fashion or another, or

all three. In a way, if she hadn't been worried about Steve, she would have been glad he had missed the rumor mill in full swing today.

"Easy girl, we know that. The government does too. We're working around it."

Barb sighed. "It isn't fair. He's a victim of all this too."

She noticed Callahan watching her carefully, "And what are you going to do about that?"

She crossed her arms. "If I had any sense, I'd go punch Doc Perkins in the face." Barb hadn't needed to be close to Carol to catch even half of all her complaining about her father at school. The man was an insensitive jerk, to say the least.

Callahan nodded, surprisingly accommodating of her intentions of assaulting one of the most respected men in town. "Course, that'd get you in jail and then who'll help Steve catch up on classes?"

Barb frowned at him. "...I know what you're trying to do. It's not like I can actually do anything about Doc Perkins."

Callahan shrugged, "Maybe not with this, but no reason to give up hope. Seems to me, Steve's lucky he's got friends like you at his back."

"Uhm. Thanks?" Barb wavered, trying to figure out Callahan's angle as he stretched and scratched at an armpit. Ew.

"Well, I'm sure there's something you can do to help Steve," he said, looking drowsy already. "Don't sell yourselves short. You kids are the most stubborn Scooby gang I ever met." He chuckled as she sighed and rolled her eyes at the comparison, even though his words did set some gears in her mind into motion. "And here's Flo," he nodded to Barb's right.

"Barb!" The older woman put down a small stack of files on her desk. "Thanks for coming, dear!"

"Of course, Flo." Barb held up the bag of clothes she had been carrying in one hand. "It's all here. I'm not sure they'll fit...but..."

“Oh trust, me, it’s better than anything Hop has,” the older woman snorted. “Button ups and old jeans. Like a logger! No way to dress for - ” she blinked and they both turned to Callahan.

“Nrkk?” He jerked awake and blinked at them. “Wha wazzat Flo?”

“Phil,” she sighed, “for the last time, go home already. We’ll call you if we need anything. Just use the medical leave already.”

Callahan didn’t seem happy, but shuffled to his desk and fished out a set of keys.

Flo watched him go severely. “And you better eat something when you get back, don’t think I won’t check, because I will!” She sighed, to Barb, she muttered, “Big babies the lot of them,” getting a giggle out of the younger girl. “Now, let’s go get these sorted. I’ve got some other things to bring to Hop’s. Could you help me carry them to my car?”

“Sure!”

## **Sunday November 13th**

When Barb had gotten home, her mother screamed, dropping a mug and ignoring the steaming mess as she folded Barb into a sobbing, shaking hug. Her father joined them shortly after and they stood there for a long time. After trying to get some food in her, her father helped her to bed once Barb nearly fell asleep in her pasta.

After she woke up, her mother jumped to her feet from the chair she’d placed by the door when Barb emerged. She hovered until Barb finally sent her away. “I can still shower by myself mom. I’m tired, that’s it.” Her mother would’ve hovered all night longer if her father hadn’t read the darkening storm on Barb’s face and interceded. Letting her retreat to her room and lay in the bed, Barb lay there, tired, but unable to fall asleep as the sounds of her parents going to bed faded into silence too. She just lay there in the dark, staring at the ceiling and trying not to think about what Hopper said about there being more than just Demogorgons out there.

That night, she abruptly woke up after midnight with a note by bed

from her father and, reading it, started to tear by the time she got to “above all else, stay safe.” She looked at the note a moment longer, trying to sort out the last week and her childhood of expectations, before deciding she couldn’t stay in her room a minute longer.

Barb stopped the Cabriolet just outside Nancy’s cul-de-sac. The other girl’s house was still flanked by a variety of nondescript vans and, even this late at night, people dressed in suits formed a vigilant perimeter around it. Another van was parked outside the Byer’s house and Barb’s heart stuttered until she was sure it wasn’t following her. She had to go through questioning with the others at the hospital, and that was when the government agents first warned her not to go blabbing about the Demogorgon or El to her parents. All these people with their eyes on their little band was terrifying. Anyways, odds were Jonathan and Joyce would be still be with Will at the hospital. Fresh out of friends to sneak to, Barb drove to the ruins of Steve house.

The place had long since burned out into a desolate wreck as she pulled up. Unable to sit still, she got out the flashlight that made her think of Joyce with a pang of fondness and walked up to the front door. In the blackened mess of ashes, it was no longer possible for her to pick out what, if anything was left, could be the Demogorgon’s remains. She lingered for a moment, thinking of what to do now. Where could they, she, go with the Demogorgons, and more, still out there? A prickle ran up her arm as the paranoid thought hit her: what if there was another one here?

Barb sighed, and got on the move again. She circled the ruins of Steve’s house, reflecting on all the time she had spent here the last week. Something colder than the night chill within her clenched as she ran through the memories. It coalesced into a mad urge to confront the mess where it started settled in her gut. With fresh purpose, she rounded the corner to the backyard and glared at Steve’s pool.

Was. Was that...By the pool.

Was that a body?

## **4. The First Weekend After**

### **Summary for the Chapter:**

Steve's parents suck.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Content warning

### **Friday November 18th**

Flo put a cup of coffee in front of Steve, breaking his attention from his father and Hopper's one-sided shouting match. She patted his shoulder gently. "Would you like cream or sugar with that dear?"

"Sugar," he croaked. Steve hadn't spoken much this morning. "Lots of it."

Flo nodded and patted him again before going to fetch it.

" – irreplaceable records! How can you not see that?"

Automatically, Steve raised the coffee to his lips and took a swig because there wasn't anything else he could do. His father was starting to circle around to the start of his outrage. How his mother could stand his father when he had sides like this, Steve just couldn't understand. Then he cringed from the bitterness of the black coffee as his father shook a folder in the police chief's face. What was inside? Insurance papers? His mom let slip that that's where they'd come from. First thing they did back in Hawkins after their flight was delayed from sudden heavy rain in New York, was it see their son Steve after the house burned down? Nope. It was hitting the insurer's office the moment the doors opened.

"It was a gas leak Mr. Harrington." Hopper looked like he was sucking on a lemon as he repeated himself. "We followed it up, and the only people who were there were your son and his friends. They're lucky they got out."

At the mention of “his friends,” Steve’s father shot him a glare. Yuuuup, the old man definitely blamed him for this, and ironically, he was completely right. Not that Steve would’ve done any different. For the hundredth time, he put the brakes on his brain before it could try to imagine what could’ve happened if they hadn’t dropped the roof on the damn Demogorgon.

In the end, it was a hollow victory given how these things could apparently cross over any damn where they pleased. For now, Steve accepted the wadded napkin of sugar packets Flo handed off to him and began mechanically tearing them open and dumping them in his mug as he looked his father square in the eye.

His father looked away and emphasized something about “serious consequences” to Hopper again. Steve blinked. He thought that only he got speeches special about that. After seeing Jonathan take on Lonnie and that talk they had, he was starting to think that the other boy was a pretty good influence on his life. His father raged, and a smaller, primal part of him flinched. The part of him that remembered whacking the Demogorgon with a nail bat seethed sulkily at the disrespect his father was heaping on Chief Hopper.

“Mom, what’s going to happen now with the house gone?” he finally asked, tired of listening to his father rage and his mother’s moody silence. “Are you building a new one?” Up to this point he hadn’t thought there’d be any alternative, and he was startled at what he had taken for granted as a thread of unease settled in his stomach.

She gave him a bored look, “Well, we’re going to take you with us to Denmark. The project there will still go forward and your father and I are eying a delightful little condo we found just outside Copenhagen...”

Steve tuned that out as his mother droned on. Shit. He didn’t want to go to Denmark. What was he going to do there? Eat sausage and walk around in green lederhosen? Did they even play basketball or baseball there?

How would he live being cooped up with his parents fighting over every little thing again knowing those things were on the loose in Hawkins, Indiana?

His mother must have read the expression on his face as she scooped up her purse and stood. "Harold, dear."

His father swallowed the last word in his rant. "What, Tiffany?"

"We're going to miss the reservation at Enzo's if we don't get moving soon."

He gaped at her, before exploding again. "Our house blew up and you're worried about our *reservation at Enzo's*?" Steve's father erupted. Steve flinched, but raised an eyebrow at the exchange as he took a swig of the sugary mess he made of his coffee. He promptly gagged at the taste.

"The house can't be saved. Like you always say, you have to let go of failures to keep moving on." These was a pointed edge to her tone as she bore a hole in Steve's father with her eyes. Well shit, was Steve going to be saved by his parents' usual marital tension? He could hope. "Come on Steve, if your father needs more time to bother Chief Hopper - *who was kind enough to take you in for us like he was one of his own* - then you and I can talk about what's going to happen with you now while we hold the table for his *important business*."

Hopper's mustache twitched as he and Steve made eye contact. He raised an eyebrow. *This how they usual are, kid?*

Steve nodded as his mother snapped her fingers. "Where did you park your BMW?" He ditched the coffee, with a "see ya pops" as his father spluttered in their wake.

"Pops?"

Under his breath, Hopper muttered, "that's what makes him upset?"

The moment the waiter took her order for wine and the cheese platter, Steve's mother turned to pin him with an intense look. However, her amber eyes a bit warmer than their usual flinty suspicious look. "So, I heard you have a new girlfriend. She like the Pullman's daughter then? What was it...Laurie?" Steve raised his glass to his lips taking a gulp to wet his suddenly dry throat and buy

himself time. While his father raged about the failures in Steve's life at large, his mother was much more observant and precise. She used to be warm, as if indulging in his life. Then, after his father's affairs, she had become distant, dissecting Steve's life like a jeweler checking for flaws in the expectations of her once-immaculate life.

"Yeah, mom. Nancy. Nancy Wheeler?"

She had to think for a moment. "...Ted Wheeler's daughter? Well, you certainly could have done worse."

A spike of something annoyed and angry fizzled in Steve as he sighed. "She's nice, like actually a nice person, mom. Laurie wasn't." Even he knew that, not that his mother listened, pleased with the arrangement as she was.

His mother hummed and hawed. "Is that so? She must be if you're being so...gallant with her reputation."

Steve knew better than to give his mother more ammunition. Instead he caught a chunk of ice in his next sip and crunched on it like he was eight years old and bored out of his mind again. He gathered that, apparently, doing so still annoyed her as she winced and fiddled with her soup spoon.

Ignoring it like she did with anything she found too distasteful to be beneath her attention she changed the topic. "You didn't seem all that thrilled with the idea of coming to Denmark with us."

Steve gave her a look. "Yeah, no mom. I'm halfway through junior year and next year's senior year! You really going to take me away from Tommy and C -" his breath caught and his mother froze. "Carol," he grated out at last. His mother sat with pursed lips, only giving him wide-eyed looks until the server came with divine intervention, bearing gouda and a bottle of Chardonnay.

After awkwardly nibbling at the appetizer in silence, Steve's mother tried again. "I understand, that you had a, uh, difficult, year, Steve. What with everything the past week." She didn't usually flounder with words like this, at a genuine loss for what to say instead of what barb might get her what she wanted. "And what with Charles...well



uhm.” Steve felt a glower settle over him at the thought of Carol’s father. His parents had taken the impending lawsuit rather well for all that they were shocked by the complete 180 in their former family friend’s behavior. His mother took one look at his face and sighed. “So what is it that you want Steve? Your father’s work is taking us overseas more and more. Like I said, we were already looking at a place in Europe. Are you sure you want to stay here alone, with *just* Tommy now?”

The accusation that he didn’t have any other friends stung. Acquaintances, sure. A long time ago, there had been all the kids his mother carefully curated as acceptable to the clout the Harrington’s wealth could call to heel in Hawkins, Indiana. It was just as long ago that Steve realized out of them all, Carol and Tommy had been the only ones who understood Steve and he them.

But it wasn’t like that anymore.

### **Saturday November 19th**

“I don’t like this Tiffany, not a bit!”

“You don’t have to, his mind’s made up.”

“He’s seventeen years old, he doesn’t know any better! He’ll just have friends over and – ow!”

Steve’s mother retracted her elbow from where she gouged it into her husband’s side. “Since it seems that you forgot, those friends are the ones who helped get him out when they realized something was wrong.”

“So that drugged up has-been of a cop says,” Steve’s father muttered.

His wife promptly ignored that outburst. “We need to respect his choice,” she reiterated for the umpteenth time that morning.

“You’re just coddling him. He’s going to be spoiled,” his father grumbled, also retreading old ground.

Steve wanted to sink into seat as his parents discussed his dismal future. They never cared to hide away such conversations before. It

seemed surviving the destruction of the house wasn't any reason to change that.

"I can't believe we're going to be shelling out for an apartment here on top of everything else," his father complained, miserly as ever for all that he didn't pay attention to the family's personal accounts. Those fell under Steve's mother's purview. Or rather, he had, grudgingly, handed over the bank key to them, giving her full reign after the second affair.

"Oh Harold, what's it going to cost? Another two grand? Don't tell me we can't afford it after *that!*" she waved a hand dismissively. Steve blinked. That sounded like a lot more than anything had ever cost, aside from the bimmer. It wasn't like his father bothered to tell him the price tag for even that though. "His school's here, his friends are here, and Hopper promised to check in on him for us so we don't even have to worry about a housekeeper."

"You honestly think he can take care of himself, even with the police chief checking in?"

Finally, Steve slid down the leather upholstery, suppressing a fresh sigh. At least his mom was on board. His dad could complain all he wanted, but the fact that they were on the way to the real estate office now meant that, once again, his father conceded to his mother setting down the law.

Actually, the thought of his own place without his parent's rules and their ghosts with the art and fancy decorations hanging over him was surprisingly tantalizing. It was a kind of freedom that, for all his family's wealth, he hadn't envisioned before. The thought of a place where he, Nancy, Jonathan, and Barb could just hang out...there was something incredibly cozy about that and getting away from everything that happened at his parent's house.

As they pulled into the realtor's parking lot, Steve sat up straight. His parents, still arguing, aside, he was feeling more enthusiastic about the prospect than he had the day before.

“You sure you don’t want a place with a pool? You were such a good swimmer,” his mother remarked, a bit mournfully.

Steve shuddered at the chill running through him at the thought. Let his mother think it was the winter cold in the empty apartment they were about to leave. His father and the agent were already out the door discussing something about mortgages and contracts. Apparently, his father would prefer to just buy out the apartment rather than paying rent.

Still, this place was as good as any; a decent-sized main room with kitchen and a single bedroom and bathroom. From the expression on his parent’s faces, it was clear they thought it little more than a hovel. But it wasn’t like Steve was going to be buying art pieces and ornaments that they were never around to enjoy. Let them furnish their new apartment in Denmark. He haphazardly managed to negotiate with his father on getting a bigger allowance per month since the apartment was a fraction of the price of the places they had considering otherwise. It was a little bit shocking to see how much weirder his parents were about prices and prestige since his father’s business took off.

This place wasn’t that far from downtown, so shops and restaurants were close. Also, the agent made sure to only pick from the nicer parts of town with the police station not that far away too. It surprised Steve how much of a difference knowing that Hopper and Flo would be nearby and it cinched the deal for him.

That and the fact that there was no pool.

“Actually, it’s fine mom.”

His mother raised a brow. “You’re sure about this? We have options Steve dear. You don’t have to just...ahem, settle on the first place you find. I’m sure there are other options that are just as,” she looked around. The apartment wasn’t particularly old or new, just plain. “... nice,” she amended.

“It’s just until I graduate,” he mumbled.

His mother looked around, to him, then just sighed and nodded. “Ok,

Steve. It's your decision." There was clearly a warning implied in that, like his mother was saying "no takebacksies," but Steve brushed it off. It wasn't like he really got anything out of his parents' wealth before anyways, aside from the party, alcohol, and the BMW. Now not even they sounded appealing as his thoughts scurried away from flower-faced monsters.

## **Sunday November 20th**

His father dropped them off at the main strip in town after lunch, announcing that he had business to wrap up with the company office in town before they flew out again that night.

His mother took one look at Melvald's before blinking. "I forgot what this town was like." Her voice was so saturated with disdain, Steve didn't know what to say when he stopped to look back at her. "Denmark is so much more quaint with the little cafes and restaurants. There's so much more...history! And then Irma! What a delightful grocery store. The store here, uhm, what was it again?"

"Bradley's," Steve answered as he held the door open.

"Ugh. It has nothing on Irma's. Cheese and wine from France, fresh food from the countryside..." she sighed wistfully.

Steve shrugged as she passed by, lost in thought. It was rather what he expected of her these days.

Inside, Steve took two steps in and stopped. At the counter, checking out for the black police officer that had helped them, was Joyce. She was all dressed in her vest, looking bright-eyed as she joked with the other man and waved him off.

Then her eyes caught on him. "Steve!"

He waved, a genuine smile on his face at her delight as she hurried out from behind the counter to greet them. "Hey Joyce!"

"It's good to see you! I still haven't had a chance to thank you for keeping an on Jonathan and everything with Will!" she patted his side. "You should come by sometime, there'll always be a place for you in my home and, well, I don't like to brag, but I do a *very nice*

baked rotini.”

“It’s nothing Joyce, I owe you a lot too,” Steve grinned, eyes flicking back to where he had picked out the bat and to the counter. He wondered if they had replaced the shotgun there.

His mother made an odd sound and Joyce turned, “Oh but where are my manners! Mrs. Harrington! It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you around town!”

For once, his mother seemed at a complete loss for words. “Uhm, well, yes...the housekeeper...”

“I really have to say, you did an excellent job raising your son here,” Joyce patted Steve, “good, dependable boy. My son Jonathan hasn’t had a friend like him in, well, gosh...forever.” Steve’s thoughts immediately jumped to when he beat-up Jonathan before everything went down and chuckled nervously at how genuine Joyce seemed about every word she said.

After a moment, his mother exclaimed, “Hasn’t he?” in a bit of a strangled tone.

Uh oh.

Joyce continued to beam at them, “Of course, and if there’s anything you need, just bring it to me.” She raised a hand to cup her mouth, adding slyly, “I’ll put it on my employer’s discount. You’re practically family after all this,” she winked.

His mother took a stuttering breath and Steve hopped into action. “Thanks Joyce, I’ll take you up on that, but my mom...uhm.”

“We’re in a bit of a rush, what with our flight out tonight from Indy...” his mother had apparently recovered and was inching away as she spoke.

Joyce’s grin faltered a little, before she nodded and gave Steve a warm smile. “Of course, you just let me know if you folks need anything.”

Once they ducked into the home care aisle, his mother shuddered, "Since when you let *that woman* get so brazen with you?"

Steve stopped short of taking a closer look at the pot he was about to pick up. "Wait, what? What do you mean by that?" He frowned.

"I thought you knew better than associating with *guttersnipe* like that woman and her boys." She spit out the word like it was disgusting just referencing that.

"Mom." He said it with all the tone of "what the fuck." "Did you not hear anything about what happened last week?"

His mother sniffed, "Only that she lost track of her son. Again. What a shameful display."

"Will Byers was kidnapped!" Steve hissed.

"By who? What I heard, she just *miraculously* found him, walking into the hospital with the boy half dead." She shook her head. "I've heard stories about what happens when it comes to that with unwanted children. I thought you wiser than that, Steve."

Caught off guard and unable to talk about the Demogorgon, Steve mentally flailed until the implication in those words left him breathless. "Mom. No. No, just...no! Joyce would never hurt Will!"

"It's in the family, you heard what they said about that deadbeat father." She gave him a weird look, "And since when do you know her boys by name?"

Steve took a breath and turned away. "Just, you know what? Forget it mom. Let's just drop it." After a moment, she began walking again – back the way they came. "Mom? Wait up!"

"Thank you, uhm...Joyce. You have a good day," his mother strolled back out the door without a look back.

"You too Mrs. Harrington!" Joyce waved, nonplussed, but genial all the same.

"Sorry, Joyce," Steve apologized as he hurried to catch up.

"Anytime, sweetheart!" she called back kindly. "By the way, are you doing anything on Thanksgiving? We should catch up!" He waved back.

Outside the door, he caught up to his mother walking down the street purposefully. When he finally did, without looking back, she said, "We'll have nothing to do with that woman, or her family, you hear me? I'll have Jill, oh, your father's new secretary, bring in a catalogue and we'll order everything you need." The way she said that didn't brook any argument and Steve scowled, shoulders hunching.

"Mom..."

"Steve, remember what I said about the people you spend your time with. Remember that well," she warned as she walked up to a payphone and slid the door shut to get the final word in.

Steve frowned and shoved his hands in his pockets. Fine, his mother could be weird about it if that was what she wanted. At the end of the first day, neither she nor his father even went through the non-disclosure statement Hopper pushed into his father's hands. All they had done was look at the check the government was going to sign for them and the papers were signed without a moment's hesitation.

"Hey, Steve. Oh, hi Nancy!" he pantomimed to himself. "Did you have a good weekend? Oh sure did. What happened? My parents came back in town! And wouldn't you know? My dad's an asshole like always and my mom's still a bitch who, *apparently*, thinks Joyce Byers is the scum of the earth, you're using me to climb the ladder, and Jon's white trash. How was your weekend Nancy?" Steve paced around. He kicked a stone nearby before sighing again and falling into a crouch, running hands through his hair. "Mom, really? The fuck." Why did she always have to be like this?

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Warning for neglectful parents in the case of Steve  
and his interactions with father and mother

AND

Warning for classist attitudes and implications of

child-harm addressed toward Joyce

AND

Warning for domestic violence references towards the Byers

Edit March 22, 2021 to change "Sophie" to "Laurie" to match one of Steve's old girlfriends off the wiki's minor characters



## 5. The First Thanksgiving After

### Summary for the Chapter:

Joyce opens her home during Thanksgiving

### Tuesday November 22nd

After all the craziness of the last few weeks, moods and business were low enough that Joyce could make a point of sitting down with her boys dinner most days than not. As they were picking up after one such meal, Joyce remembered. “Oh boys!” Will looked up from the remnants of his peas and Johnathan sat back down.

“Yeah mom?” her older son asked.

“This weekend, do you mind if Steve joins us? For Thanksgiving.”

Jonathan didn’t seem to mind, which Joyce chalked up to the craziness with the Demogorgon, but Will screwed his face up, “who?”

“Jonathan’s friend,” Joyce explained. Jonathan seemed to think it over before acknowledging it with a shrug and nod. “Will, honey, he lost his house and his parents are always out of town...so...”

“Wait, Steve’s the guy who blew up his house?” Will’s eyes were wide with awe.

“He and Barb,” Jonathan reminded him. Leaving Barb uncredited seemed like a disservice to how much work she put into taking the Demogorgon down.

Meanwhile, Joyce sighed because of course that’s what Will would remember. “Yes. I saw him this weekend and he stopped by to chat today. Poor kid’s got no family in town this weekend and he’s all alone in that empty apartment of his.”

“Nancy and Barb can’t get away from their parents either,” Jonathan shared. “They were talking about it at lunch.” Steve had asked what their Thanksgiving plans were at school. He hadn’t thought much of it when Steve had asked him more about what it was usually like for

them all.

“Oh, did you want to do something with them?” Joyce asked, only for Jonathan to shrug.

“Like I said mom, it’s not like they can. Their parents freaked out after it. Won’t give them an inch,” he said.

Joyce nodded. It was a shame. She was curious how well the girls were doing after everything they went through those few weeks ago. More nights than not since everything blew over, Joyce woke up from vivid nightmares and flashbacks where she never left that Upside Down, or worse, that Will hadn’t. She hoped the girls were faring well, “Well how about just Steve then? He said he didn’t want to be a bother,” she snorted at the thought.

“Is Steve Nancy’s boyfriend?” Will asked, getting a nod from Jonathan. “Mike says he’s a loser with silly hair.”

Jonathan coughed, trying to hide a smile. “Well, Mike’s right about the hair, but...why don’t you meet him and see for yourself?” he patted his younger brother and started ferrying dishes to the sink.

“You’re ok with it, honey?” Joyce asked, still eyeballing Will like he was made of glass.

“Sure, mom.”

### **Wednesday November 23rd**

Before going to work, Joyce had enough time to run a load of laundry, a rather dreadful prospect. Every time Joyce entered the laundry room the last few days, she struggled getting the wash together and she just couldn’t put it off any longer. There was an awful, awful smell and she was hoping that whatever it was that Jonathan or Will was doing wouldn’t get stuck in the clothes.

At first she thought she left the bleach open and it spilled and got into something, but no. There was nothing like that in the room. She couldn’t even remember the last time she used the bleach anyways.

Just the usual joys of mothering two teenage boy Joyce thought to

herself, resigned to her fate. She rattled around the laundry room, realizing she used up all the detergent. "I know I have another bottle somewhere around here." She began rooting around the clutter. Jonathan helped her sometimes, but never seemed to put things in the place where he found them. As she poked around, there was a small crash of metal. Her foot kicked something under table she set up there and so she crouched. "What's this?"

Pulling out a tray, Joyce was confused, then disgusted as that awful smell finally revealed its source. "Ugh!" she gagged. She took one look at the tray's contents and nearly dropped them in shock and horror. "Oh, ew, Oh, Jonathan! Will!" EW!" Hurriedly, she got up and kicked the door open. Going to the back door, she fumbled the handle and took a couple steps out into the backyard before flinging the tray's contents out, shaking it vigorously before dumping it there. With a sigh, Joyce rubbed at her head. Well, hopefully the laundry room wouldn't smell so weird anymore. She sighed even louder than before, then went to fetch the hose to clean up the mess. This was going to make her late wasn't it?

Joyce just barely made it to work on time, not that it really made a difference. It was a rather quiet day all things considered. What with the last week, any festive cheer in town was dampened by the lines of "missing" posters along the storefronts of main street. A part of her was tempted to take her lunch break and hoof it over to the station to see if Hopper or Powell had found anything. She hadn't been crazy about the idea of more cops getting involved after the first time they dropped by her house and Callahan joked about the Christmas lights. However, after what she heard went down at the school, Joyce had nothing but respect for the other officers. After all, she knew how much of a handful Will's friends could be firsthand.

It helped that Powell was always willing to hear her out and trade notes on any of the details she could remember about the Demogorgons and their nest in the Upside Down. He also seemed to share her concerns about the threat of more Demogorgons lurking out there, and he was much easier to talk with than his partner. Joyce suspected that the younger man was putting up an act of being dimwitted.

At least, she was pretty sure it was an act.

Trying to put all of that out of mind, Joyce was throwing herself into the inventory paperwork that had piled up with all the craziness this month when the bell jangled. "Welcome to Melvald's!" she called out distracted. She was still working through figures when the customer came up to the counter and she pushed the paperwork aside.

"Hey, Joyce."

She blinked. The portly man before her was familiar, but it was the voice that got her going. "Oh, hello. What can I get for you today?"

"Just this, can't quite figure out what happened to the pliers in the store today."

"Hmm?" Joyce murmured, ringing the man up. Why was that voice so familiar?

"How's your son? I heard he went missing the last week."

Joyce recoiled, taken aback by the rather personal question.

"I don't think that's any of your business," she said, crossing her arms and glaring.

"Oh, sorry. I was just hoping for good news. One of my shift managers went missing too."

Joyce softened, then noticed the Radio Shack name tag on the man's shirt. "Bob. Newby? Bob? From Hawkins High School class of 1954?"

The man lit up. "You do remember me!"

Joyce scoffed, her mind racing. "I thought you went off to Purdue for college?"

Bob shrugged. "The engineering gig was going ok, but I had to come back for my grandpa's funeral a bit ago. No one else could figure out what to do with the house, so I ended up staying here long term." He pointed to the name tag with a note of pride, "Now I'm running the Radio Shack. So, if you need anything..."

"Wow, oh, but I'm so sorry about your grandfather," Joyce sighed.

Her parents had died in a crash shortly after Will was born, she could relate to that.

“Well, it’s not all bad. After all, I got to meet you again,” Bob gave her a wink as he pocketed his purchase and waved cheerfully. “Be seeing you around, Joyce.”

For a moment Joyce scoffed, then chuckled. Was he...? “See ya!” she called back, shaking her head with a small smile at the day’s turn of events.

That night, as she sat down for dinner, Joyce laid down the law. “So...whoever decided keeping a tray of leeches in the laundry room was a good idea, I have to say I am very disappointed in you.”

Will jerked, nearly spilling his glass of milk. “Leeches?” he asked faintly.

Joyce cast him a rueful glance. “I hope those weren’t something you needed for school, mister. Whatever you were doing to them, they smelled awful. I tossed them all out back.”

But Will shook his head.

Jonathan sighed, “It’s ok little man. Just ask us for help with your project next time ok?”

“But I didn’t....” Will began only to trail off.

“Well it wasn’t me.” Jonathan said. Then he looked at Will and rubbed at his hair. “Will, you don’t need to hide things from us. Remember what we said, we want to help you. If you need something all you have to do is talk to us!”

Will nodded very slowly.

Joyce had suspected Will, but hadn’t thought he’d take the news this badly. “We’ll find them a better, place next time. Get a tank maybe? We can help you catch some new ones, but, ugh, that smell was getting horrible.”

"No," Will shook his head quickly, "Nope. No more leeches. I'll, uhm, pick a different...project."

"...well, if you're sure," Joyce said, putting a chicken breast on his plate. Privately, she was quite relieved she wouldn't have to deal with the leeches again. "Now, Bradley's had a last minute sale on pumpkin pie...so I may or may not have bought two. What do you guys think? One tonight, one tomorrow?"

Jonathan at least grinned at the prospect and clapped Will's shoulder. "Want a slice?"

Will gave him a weak smile and shook his head. "I'm not that hungry, actually..."

### **Thursday November 24th**

"That should be Steve, can you get the door honey?"

Jonathan nodded as Joyce looked for a surface to set the turkey on. He went to answer the door and pulled up short. "Hi Steve....Chief?"

"Hey man," Steve said brightly enough to offset the glower on Hopper's face. "I brought potatoes," He held up an aluminum foil wrapped steel bowl and elbowed Hopper.

The older man sighed and held up a pair of bottles. "Wine. And sparkling grape juice for you kids."

Steve looked back at Hopper and rolled his eyes. "Come on man, it's not like that law's been passed yet."

Hopper poked Steve, pushing him through the threshold. "Maybe don't push your luck in front of an officer, kid."

"Steve. Oh, uhm Hop? Oh, well, we've got plenty of food. Come in!" Joyce called warmly. "How did you run into Hop?"

The two then shared a look, Steve's inquisitive as Hopper glowered at him. "Had some business," Hopper said flatly. It was the kind of tone he had always used to warn them teenagers off of something.

“And I thought Hopper could use the distraction,” Steve added. “Sorry, I ran into him last minute.” He did, at least, seem regretful to Joyce.

“Huh. Well, it’ll be fine,” Joyce said turning back. “Will, our guests are here!”

“Guests?” his voice floated out before he poked his head out from the hall. “Oh. Hi.”

“Steve, and this is *Police Chief* Hopper,” she said, with an emphasis to remind him what the older man had done for them.

Will waved shyly as Steve gave him a smile back and Hopper nodded. Then the younger man turned to Joyce, “Hey, uhm. I brought this.”

Joyce lifted the covers, but it took a bit. It was a big sheet of foil. “Oh! They’re...potatoes!”

“I never really cooked like this before,” Steve admitted. “We always had a housekeeper. I was trying to make mashed potatoes, but... uhm...”

A wave of fondness and amusement spread over Joyce as she gave the bowl of ungarnished potato mash another look.. “Well, luckily we have butter and milk. Mashing them is the hard part so it won’t take much – “

Jonathan plucked the bowl out of her hands. “I’ll do that. Sorry, mom, but your potatoes always go runny.”

Joyce blinked then set fists on her hips. “Jonathan Byers! What are you implying?” She raised a brow, but the smile on her lips betrayed her little act.

“Not implying anything, mom,” Jonathan had an impish look on his face held the bowl high over his head as if to keep it out of her reach.

At the same time, Will chimed in, “Give Jonathan a chance Mom. Can’t be worse than last year.”

“Will!” Joyce wrapped her youngest in a hug and gently noogied him.

“Not you too!”

“You didn’t even try making it this year mom.” Will managed once he squeezed out of her grasp. True to his word, casseroles and baked greens steamed on the counters of the fragrant kitchen alongside sweet pudding, custard, and pie, but no rich, starchy potatoes. She wouldn’t say it, but after last year, she didn’t want to mess it up for Steve.

“Fair enough, thank you Steve! Hop, what’s that you’re carrying?” Joyce grabbed the older man and dragged him to the kitchen.

“Hey little guy.” Steve walked over to Will. “Name’s Steve, I’ve seen you at Nancy’s once, I think. You guys always hide in the basement?”

Jonathan watched quietly as Will nodded, “Yeah, there’s a lot of room down there so its great for our campaigns.”

“That’s great,” Steve grinned. He seemed to actually mean it, so Jonathan shrugged and followed the adults. “What do you guys even do down there?” As Will immediately launched into an explanation of their D&D campaigns, Jonathan hoped Steve wouldn’t be a jerk about it. Not that he expected the other boy to be at this point. They’d come a long way since the start of November. Hopefully this would be a good time for everyone to just enjoy themselves for once without the madness of the last month hanging over them.



## **6. The First Month After Part 1- Powell's Patrol**

### **Summary for the Chapter:**

Powell goes out on patrol solo

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Content warning

Callahan was doing better, but he kept pushing it over the last few weeks, getting an earful from Flo every time about the damage he was doing not resting up. So, early on in the day when he caught the younger man dozing off, Powell had driven him home and actually pulled the younger man out of the car. So now it was just him going around the suburbs, glancing around. With Thanksgiving come and gone, things seemed to have largely gone back to normal. The missing posters were still up, of course. It was only a few weeks since the fact, so Callahan expected them to go on for longer, alongside the usual flyers for things like missing pets.

Normally, other years before this one, this time of day with the winter dusk setting in so soon would be seeing Powell heading back to the office. Since the Demogorgons though, he had been keeping an eye out for any kids out late. The thought of another Will Byers gave him the jeebies. He doubted the next one would be as lucky, so he kept an eye out for those still out this time of day. Like this one.

“Huh, it’s you,” Powell said as he pulled up close, slowed the car, and lowered the window.

“Hey, you’re that cop!” Lucas Sinclair exclaimed slowing his bike to a gentle roll.

Powell slid his shades off. “What’cha doing out this late?”

“I’m heading home. It’s literally right there,” he pointed to the next house over.

“And why were you out so late?” Powell wondered curiously. Lucas gave him a look and it took Powell a moment to place that as unease.

His stomach cramped. "Never mind, just get home safe, son."

Lucas nodded, stone-faced as Powell stopped the car and watched Lucas pull ahead. From the living room window of the boy's house, he could clearly see a woman framed by the lights, her silhouette watching up until Lucas raised the garage door. Powell had the sense that Sinclair's mother was watching his car and he leaned on his wheel with a sigh.

Sometimes he wondered what he was doing with his life. He hadn't thought about the wary looks and warning his mother had given about the police since he entered the force. After MLK Jr., he had hoped that things would have changed...but...he couldn't be that naïve. He just couldn't.

Reflecting on his own time at Hawkins Police Department, Powell deflated. There weren't that many black families in Hawkins and Powell wasn't close to any of them now. Especially since the falling out with his sister and her leaving town. The single little denomination that all the families belonged to was the rock of Hawkins's black community, and ostracization from his sister translated to ostracization from it.

For a moment, Powell wondered when his life had gotten this absurd. Out of all the police officers in Hawkins, he should be the one that the Sinclairs shouldn't have to watch like hawks anytime even the hint of a cruiser was around. The worst part was that he couldn't blame them for getting their hackles up, even if he still had been close to any of the other black families. Some lessons stuck hard.

"Powell? You there?" Flo's voice crackled out of the radio. "*The Richardsons are complaining about racoons getting into their trash cans again.*"

He raised the radio to his lips. "Be right there," he sighed, wishing Flo hadn't had to call in about that tonight. The Richardsons, because, of course, it was just his luck. He would have to make sure to look only at Mr. Richardson when he got there. Somehow, he doubted that would stop the rumors of him "undressing Mrs. Richardson with his eyes like a pervert" from getting any worse though. Tonight was turning into a real stinker.

He didn't dare turn down the call though. He could still remember the first time he tried to talk Hop's predecessor out of assigning someone else the Richardsons's beat. It always came down to gossip didn't it? The officers were just as bad as any housewife, so wasn't it lucky for Powell he befriended Hopper and Flo so early on? They were exceptions to the general rule. Still, Powell sighed as he pulled up. Even with Hopper as Chief, the others would be suspicious of their working relationship if Powell asked to be reassigned anyways. Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

As he pulled into the Richardson's driveway, for the first time that day, Powell regretted sending Callahan home early. At least Phil could use his slow act to give the Richardsons as good as he could get while they sniped at Powell. Mr. Richardson was already there with a broom and he shook his head when Powell got out of the car. "Of course it's you. Why do they always send you?"

Powell forced himself to smile and bob his head, bracing himself for the song and dance like always. "What can I do for you today Mr. Richardson, sir?"

"They're in the bins making the usual racket. Get to it. Boy."

"Right away sir," Powell beamed. His mother had always warned him about his face getting stuck scowling. Sometimes, he wondered if it could get stuck smiling the same way.

The trash bins were on the other side of garage from the house – he knew after years of gracing the Richardson property. Sill, Powell didn't take more than two steps towards them before thunder split the air.

Good lord, that was the shaking metal bin's doing wasn't it?

Powell scowled and stomped forward. "Alright you little pesks, git. Git!" The trash can shook in response. He got close enough to smack the side, making it teeter and then fall over, its lid rolling away like a rattling cymbal. "I said shoo!" Powell kicked the side of the can. The can rattled, and then *jumped off the ground* as something within it snarled. That was a new one on the officer and he jumped, barely swallowing a surprised scream. When he drew closer, he found

himself tripping to get back as something shot out of the can and into the dark with the patter of light feet.

“Not any racoon I ever heard before,” Powell remarked slowly. It was too dark for Powell to get a good look at it, but how the hell did something so small make so much more of a racket than any racoon he’d ever had to handle?

He went to report the job done to Mr. Richardson, completely missing the missus out in a nightgown as he waved vaguely to the residents and went back to the car. Things weren’t adding up here and Powell had to didn’t think it a mere coincidence for something strange like that to be out there after the Demogorgons hit town.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Warning for anti-black racist micro-aggressions and police culture. Especially degradation and association with myth of black rapist towards Powell

## 7. The First Month After Part 2 - Going with the Flo

### Summary for the Chapter:

Flo gets roped into more babysitting

### Notes for the Chapter:

Content warning

Flo hung up on the phone and glared at her cooling tea. “If Doc Perkins calls one more time, *I will scream.*”

The officer seated nearby raised a brow but only shrugged. Powell and Callahan were out on another patrol and Hopper wasn’t back from his “business meeting” that Flo suspected had to with that lab out in the woods.

Flo eyed the clock, kneaded her brows, and stood up. “I’m taking my lunch break.” She didn’t care that it was early. Things were back to normal and certainly, if this lot was happy to nap and snack at their desks and patrol cars, Flo could get away with taking ten minutes for herself.

Flo went all the way home and decompressed over a salad using her husband’s sweet onion preserves for dressings. An acquired taste, but one of her favorites that helped settle her stomach and mind as she basked in the calm of his company and their house. She was feeling a lot better when she went back in. And the next time the phone rang with Doc Perkins on the other end, she thrust it at Hopper, who happened to step through the door just then.

“No, Doc. Yes. Of course. Come in with the information and we’ll see what we can do.” Hopper said before hanging up. “Thanks for that,” he gave Flo a dirty look.

“I took the first call this morning, it was your turn.” The Perkins case was turning into a complete mess, and it didn’t help that Flo and Hopper knew the behind the scenes details of her death. Apparently, it had been one of the agents that had been killed in the high school

who had the brilliant idea of moving Carol Perkin's car to throw the trail off the lab. Now, Doc Perkins and the family of the other high school aged victim were the only ones to refuse the government payoffs. They were still rooting around for an explanation, more suspiciously paranoid as ever with the government's failed attempt to silence them. The lab had dumped that onto the HPD to handle, doing little to endear them to Flo. "How's that Harrington kid handling that man?"

Hopper sighed and rubbed his eyes before beckoning her to his office. There, he closed the door after her and sat in his chair heavily. He opened his mouth, only to pick up his little calendar on the desk and shake his head. "It's Thursday already? Damn. Wanted to talk to you about this after the weekend. So, uh Flo, you got anything going on this afternoon?"

Flo blinked and resigned herself. "I suspect I will after this. What's up Hop?"

"So...I stopped by Steve's new place." Huh, it was just Steve now? Kid must have grown on Hopper. Hopper sucked on his lip, looking for the right words. "Kid's got an...interesting lifestyle. I was hoping you could give him some pointers?"

Flo raised an eyebrow imperiously. So that's what Hopper was worried about? "I get paid to babysit you lot. A teenager, even one, is practically a full time job by itself."

"Ok. Spill, Flo. What do you want? Because the alternative is he starts living like I do."

Flo shuddered at the thought. "We agreed with the bargain the other day, you are not going back to that trailer. Steve better not end up in one either," she warned. Threatened, actually, given the tone of her voice.

"So, you'll help him?" Hopper prodded.

Realizing the trap he had set for her she sighed. "I'll pay him a visit once school's out. And you're going to find a way to pay for this, let me assure you."

Hopper nodded forlornly. “Just don’t let it be sprinkle doughnuts again.”

It was cruel of her, but at the door handle, she turned back. “I was thinking of a diet actually.” Cruel, but worth it to hear Hopper squeak like that.

Steve had been very confused when he opened the door. “Huh, Flo? Uh...”

“Hello, Steve. I didn’t realize how close you lived to the station,” she lied through her teeth. There was an amusing moment where Steve fumbled with the door, trying to stay halfway through it enough to talk to her, and close it halfway enough to block the view inside. “Thought I’d check in on you.”

He gave her a pained smile. “I’m doing fine, Flo, really –“

“It’s rather rude of you to leave a guest on the front door in this weather,” she prodded conversationally.

The boy seemed to panic at that. “What about coffee at the diner? Uhm, my coffee machine is, uh –“

“Hop told me about how you were living,” she announced quickly, heading off his attempt to deflect. “Why don’t we do something about that?”

Steve sagged, but eventually opened the door for her to come in. “This is so embarrassing,” he muttered.

Flo walked in and tried not to sigh. It wasn’t as bad as she expected, but it still wasn’t pretty. “Right. First things first, you put those dishes on the table in the sink. Do you even have any detergent or sponges? A drying rack? Dish rag? No? Good thing I came prepared then. Come on, kid.”

“Don’t eat in your bed, the crumbs’ll get into weird spots and then

you'll get bugs. You don't want ants in a place this nice. It's disgusting." Flo warned, "Grab the other corner of the sheet, no, it's all twisted around. The other - that one. Now we pull it like so and..." Flo nodded. "Good, now, here's a tip. Come over to this side and tuck that corner under the mattress too. See, if you don't kick the blankets all the way out, half the job's done already, even after you use it."

Steve nodded. "I think the last time I made my own bed was when I was, like six."

"Well, just make a habit of it and you'll be fine without a housekeeper like the rest of us. Or if you don't want to, pick up tricks like this. You can do the same with the comforter. Why don't you give it a go yourself?" She watched Steve resign himself and do a passable job. "Just don't forget to give it a washing now and then. Speaking of washing," Flo picked up one of the nearby shopping bags and examined the sweater in it. Cashmere, a nice blue one too, and completely new. She would be lying if she said she wouldn't mind getting one for her husband. "Please tell me you haven't been buying new clothes instead of just washing them?"

"It's so *embarrassing* though."

"Harrington. Kid," Flo raised a hand to her brows, dismayed.

"What do I? Call Mrs. Wheeler? Hi, this is your daughter's boyfriend, could you teach me how to do the laundry?" Steve groaned, and fell face-first onto his freshly made bed.

"What about the Byers?"

Steve poked his head up, "I just started to get along with them, I don't want them to think I'm an *idiot*," he mumbled into the comforter.

That might have given Jonathan pause if he heard that. Instead, Flo stepped forward. "Well come along, I'm here now and I've already seen it all. And trust me, this is still nothing on Hopper's trailer." That seemed to cheer him up a bit as she pulled him along.



Flo sank into the couch wearily. "That's the dishes, laundry, bedroom. You'll buy a vacuum cleaner?" Steve nodded. "Look if you really get stuck, ask me about it, but you're a bright kid. Have some faith in yourself, you'll figure it out."

Steve nodded a bit more gingerly at that comment.

"So," She sat up, "You're not going to make me come out here to make sure you're not living like a pig are you?"

Steve cringed and shook his head. "Nope, I'll do a better job, I swear."

"Okay, we'll work on cooking next time then." Flo took a long around. "This is a nice place you know, big one for someone your age all by yourself." She gave him a razor of a grin. "Well, I'm sure that Wheeler won't mind coming over now." She grinned as he turned pink. Then a thought occurred to her. "Are you two using protection?"

"Oh my god," Steve slowly sank his face to his knees, his face and the tips of his ears flushing crimson.

Flo cackled. She flat out cackled like a witch as Steve closed his eyes and hoped for it to end soon.

The following week, Flo met with Steve at Bradleys before heading over.

"Pasta is super simple, and doesn't need much," Flo said as she set out the pack of sausages and vegetables on the counter. "It won't kill you to eat more vegetables." At least she didn't have to lecture him about fruit. He seemed happy enough getting apples and bananas himself. "You're a growing boy, and your hair will appreciate it more than you think," she couldn't help but tease with a wide grin.

"I'm never going shopping with you again," he swore softly.

She waited at the kitchen for him to duck into the bathroom and drop his own vanity purchases off. “Come kid, we don’t got all day and my husband’s a better cook than I am, so at the very least I want to get home on time tonight.”

Steve wasn’t a bad student. If anything, it seemed like he just needed someone to show him how it worked so he wouldn’t give up before he started washing and cutting the vegetables up. He worked intently, focused as he clumsily cut peppers and carrots into uneven chunks. As he worked, he repeated Flo’s instructions to boil water, strain the pasta, and then fry up the onions before heating the sauce. “Don’t put it all in at once,” he muttered to himself again as she had warned him at the start. She had caught him about to dump everything, unpeeled and unwashed, into the pot and turn on the heat.

“Very good, just like that.” Flo took her mug from the machine. In all of her two visits here, she had used it two times more than Steve had in all his time here. “Add them to the sauce and...”

While the tomato sauce began to boil, Steve stared into the pot. “Hey Flo?”

“Hmm?”

“Why’d you say that prayer for Carol that time?”

Flo lowered her mug slowly, watching Steve and trying to gauge the mood. He stood, shoulders pinched and hunched over. “I thought... after that monster got her, the very least she deserved was a kind word.”

Steve continued to stare at the pot, the burble of its cooking filling the silence between them. Ultimately, he broke the silence. “Carol wasn’t a believer. Her old man kept trying to take to church ‘til high school. She hated every moment of it.” Flo shifted, uncomfortable and not sure of what to say. “Said she couldn’t believe a word of it.”

Awkwardly, Flo admitted, “That’s what some people say.”

Steve still hadn't turned around. "Does that mean that God punished her for that?" His voice was very soft.

"No," Flo said immediately. "No. Anyone who says that is speaking out their ass."

Steve finally turned and gave her a cagey look over his shoulder. Flo found a smile for him and walked over to pat him. "Carol didn't deserve that anymore than for you to lose your house fighting that thing, Steve. I just showed wanted to show my respects. We all have our own way. My prayers...you. Well. You went after that thing didn't you? I think that means a whole lot more than words from a stranger like me."

At last he said, "...Hey. They meant a lot to me," of her prayer, giving Flo a half smile as he chuckled her with his shoulder gently.

Don't cry, don't cry, Flo instructed herself as she took a sniffing breath. "The sauce is burning Steve," she warned as he turned and yelped, flailing with the knobs on the stove.

At Steve's doorstep, Flo looked back at the boy. "Just read the instructions on the box when you buy them, Steve. You got the idea down, you make one pasta, you've made them all."

"Thanks Flo." He gave her a smile. "See you next week?"

"Sure. My husbands' carrots and beans will be coming in this weekend. Think you can handle making some stew next week?"

Flo left Steve's apartment in a good mood. Steve's place even had an elevator making things easier for her aching bones. She was heading out the exit, when the mailboxes caught her eye.

Oddly, Steve's was full, an envelope crammed in such that it was threatening to fall out like the ones on the ground. He only moved in a few weeks ago. How many scalpers could've started filling that in? Flo guessed that would have to be part of next week's lesson. In a charitable mood, Flo reached out to open the box to see if there wasn't anything urgent until next week. She fumbled as several more

envelopes tumbled out onto the ground. “Odd...” she picked one up. It and all the ones that filled nearly all of the mailbox were of the same size and color. There was no sender, and no return address. What could it be? Flo tore one open and read the card, then frowned, furrowed her brow and read it again. She tore open another...and then another. Each and every card had the same thing printed in bright red script:

*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*

*But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for an eye....*

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Warning for stalking behavior and threats couched in religious themes towards Steve - getting hate mail with threatening(?) Bible quotes

## **8. The First Month After Part 3 - Small Thanks**

### **Summary for the Chapter:**

Barb hatches a plot for Thanksgiving

It had started with a conversation at school after lunch.

“Hopper can’t do that!”

“Why not?”

Barb gave Steve a scandalized look. “Because you don’t!”

Steve glanced about. Nancy and Jonathan had gone ahead, each trying to catch up with some project with a timetable the Demogorgons threw out of whack. Now it was just the two of them, trying to ignore the jeers Tommy’s new crowd sent their way as Barb fumed, closing her book and waiting for Steve to finish his pizza.

“My parent’s left me at home all the time.” Steve pointed out. “And it’s still a hot meal.”

That set Barb aback enough to chill out and she gave Steve a sideways frown. “Jonathan was right. Your parents are jackasses too. I can’t believe they flew all the way here only to fly right out and leave you alone for Thanksgiving!”

“It’s not a big deal Barb, I’m used to it. I’ll just go to Tommy’s.” Barb raised a brow and he raised his hand to his mouth. “...No wait. Guess I can’t do that anymore huh?”

Barb winced. She should have seen something like this. “I’d say you should come over to my place...”

“I told you, I already have plans it’s fine!”

“Hmm?”

“Joyce wants me to come over.”

Barb nodded warming up to the idea, “That’s...great actually. Oooh. You should bring Hopper!”

“Why would I bring Hop to Joyce’s?”

“You don’t think they have chemistry? They have a history apparently.” Barb had rued asking her mother about that and losing an afternoon to thirty-year-old gossip. “Anyways, the point is Hop will be distracted.”

“You really want to pull a fast one over the Chief?”

Barb snorted, “Because nothing screams “Thanksgiving” like ‘Swanson’s TV dinners.’”

Steve thought that over than nodded. “Yeah, ok, you’re right that sucks.”

“So, here’s what we’re going to do...”

“Really Barb? You want to hang out with Mike?” Nancy sighed. She glanced at the clock and then poked her head into the living room. Her parents were asleep after the big Thanksgiving lunch – her father in his recliner, her mother dozing off with Holly in her lap.

*“Yeah. I’m not exactly thrilled about it either, but you gotta finish that paper don’t you?”*

“That’s not going to be easy. He broods,” she warned. “He’s worse than we thought Jonathan ever was.”

*“Trust me on this Nancy.”*

Nancy sighed, “I owe you that much at least. And you’ll get him out of my hair. Plus I don’t have to go in this year, so I can’t complain.” She nodded along with all the pros. “Ok. When will you get here?”

At three thirty, the door to the basement opened and Nancy came down the steps. “Mike. Wow. Turn on the lights why don’t you?”

He turned to glare at her from the couch. "Go away Nancy."

Whatever progress they might have made as siblings after the Demogorgon seemed to have evaporated in the air with El. No matter what happened, it seemed that all of them were dealing with the deaths and losses that night better than her little brother who just holed up in the basement. He would just sit there, talking into the walkie talkie and staring at the blanket fort still set up at the window table. The only time he ever seemed to snap out of it was when his friends were over, and even that seemed half-hearted.

Nancy crossed her arms. "Mom said you gotta help Barb take her leftovers to the homeless shelter this year."

"No she didn't," he scowled. "You're lying. You always do it."

"Go ahead and ask her," Nancy shrugged. "I got a paper to do and you have got to stop holing up in here." It had only been two weeks but she was 100% done with moody, lovesick Mike.

"Just go away."

"You can't just sit here forever and cry about El."

*"I'm not crying!"*

"And I'm not leaving until you go."

Mike glared, and Nancy leveled an unrelenting look at him. Big sisters could be just as annoying as little brothers and everything about her stance threatened him with that. After the last few weeks, both siblings knew that Mike was starting to test their parents' patience. "Just go do it and I'll help cover for you for a week. Ok?" Nancy promised. "I'm backed up on homework and Barb can't do this alone. She asked for your help specifically."

"Why?"

"Actually? I don't know." Mike glared, but eventually got off the couch and accepted his jacket from her. He didn't like it, but deep down he at least respected Barb and the other teens (except Nancy, because *duh...*) after they took down a Demogorgon themselves.

“Don’t be out too late ok? Barb said she’ll give you a ride home.”

His parents were still dozing in the living room when Mike put on his shoes and stepped out. Like Nancy said, the little blue Cabriolet sat on the driveway, engine purring nicely and fresh from repairs. The window rolled down. “We’re losing time Mike!”

Mike rolled his eyes, but if he was honest, he still remembered Barb loading the rifle like she was an old pro and he didn’t want to piss someone who could pull that off.

“Hop. Wake up.” Hopper blinked and sat up fast, he fumbled for his gun until the voice said, “Woah, woah, it’s me. Steve.”

“Harrington?” the older man groaned and leaned back into his recliner. “Don’t scare me like that kid. Oof.”

“This is how you’re spending Thanksgiving?” Steve sounded incredulous as he looked around the dreary little cabin while the TV droned on in the background.

“Wait until you’re my age,” Hopper groaned, working stiff limbs and then struggled to stand up. “What’re you even doing here?”

“Now don’t panic...” Steve began, holding his hands up.

Wrong words. Hopper blinked, trying to figure out what was amiss before he scanned the room then go to his feet, stomped around, and threw open a door. *"What did you do?"*

Steve chuckled nervously. “Funny story. But, we’re going to have dinner at Joyce’s in half an hour. Let’s go.”

Hopper’s face was dead serious as he faced Steve. “Stop acting coy, kid. You know what I mean.”

“I have no idea what you’re saying,” Steve got up to that point of opening the front door before Hopper closed it shut around him and got in his face.



"I told you NO ONE can find out!"

"And no one will! Barb has a plan!" Steve squeaked as Hopper backed him up to the wall. "It's a good one I swear! Besides, cat's out of the bag now. Look, your mistake was falling asleep."

"You mean letting you stay here." Hopper growled. So Barb was in on it too huh? "She better have a good plan or she's...", Hopper fumed. Even he could see that it was too late. "Damn it Steve! I'm never going to fall asleep around you kids again."

"You know locking a person up in here all the time'll drive anyone nuts."

"I ought to lock you up in here." Hopper scowled, mind racing. "Where the hell are they?"

"I'm not telling. You and I are going to Joyce's."

"HMMMM. Joyce's."

"Yup. Got an invitation to spend Turkey Day with them and everything."

In their glaring match, Steve coolly came out on top and Hopper went to grab his jacket off the couch. "This is your one and only chance. Steve. Next time this happens, I will end you. You hear me?" He shoved a finger into Steve chest, nearly unbalancing the other boy before hunting for his hat with anger mutters.

Steve crossed his arms. Hopper's genuine rage there was terrifying, but he couldn't help but think of Barb and teddy bears as Hopper vented his newfound paternal instincts. Hopper had already stared down one of Pops Harrington's blowups for him, his threats didn't scare Steve. "Sure thing Hop."

"Hey Mike." Barb got a glare from the younger boy. "Look, I know this isn't how you thought you'd spend the day, but there's a good reason for this, ok?"

“Yeah, right. Help the poor and needy. Be a good person. Blah de blah de blah.”

Barb sighed. “You really aren’t easy to work with. You know? Is that what El would want?”

“Don’t! Talk to me about El!” Mike looked like he was about to tear something out of the car’s dashboard and throw it at her.

“Ok, ok! Jeeze. You try to help someone and this is what you get.”

Mike gave her a weird look. “What? What do you mean?”

She shook her head. “Just help me get these casseroles inside.” She picked out two giant boxes of Tupperware and held them out. “Careful, they should still be warm at least.”

It took several trips to the car. Barb didn’t appreciate the vanity with which her parents treated their image in Hawkins, but she could get behind the way they always saved leftovers and a good bit more to give to the local charities and shelters. At about five, a woman walked by calling out that they were opening the doors and Barb held out a hairnet and rubber gloves for Mike. He glared at them and Barb took one look at his face and sighed. “Alright Mike. You don’t have to help, just sit somewhere out of the way, ok? And keep your coat on. It’s cold.”

Mike hung back as Barb vanished among the other volunteer staff and the cafeteria doors opened. Suddenly he felt a bit lost and awkward as the soup kitchen came to life. He settled on sitting down on a box as people walked around him. He watched them carry dishes and force holiday cheer into their efforts for the assortment of people taking modest trays of turkey and vegetables.

“What are *you* doing?”

Mike turned and groaned. “What are you doing here, Erica?”

Lucas’s little sister rolled her eyes, “For your information, this is the shelter I did the can drive for church this year. *Of course*, I’m going to help out.”

“Great. Go help out.” He made a shooing motion.

She scrunched up her face. “Excuse me. You came here to help these needy people and now you’re just sitting on your butt? Bonus points to the boy scout.”

“God you’re so obnoxious Erica.”

“And you are sitting on my box of napkins. So.” She made a twirling motion. “Uh, huh, that’s right,” she said shooing him off her box. “Happy holidays, loser.”

She passed Barb who watched the younger girl go by with bemusement. “Friend of yours?”

“Not even,” Mike shuddered, then watched her pick out a tray of mashed potatoes for the serving bar. “Here.”

“Oh?” Barb gave him a cool look. “You’re going to help out after all?”

“Just...give me the gloves already.”

She handed them over. “You need help with the hairnet?”

“I’m fine,” he growled, putting it on and then taking the tray of potatoes so she could grab one that looked like it could be filled with cranberry pudding. Or jello. One of them, hopefully.

As they served, Mike was quiet, avoiding looking at the patrons, while Barb made up for it with a cheerful “Enjoy your meal” every time they dished something up. They worked side-by-side like that for a bit before the door opened and admitted a new group of people. Barb looked up. She suddenly elbowed Mike. “Ow! What was that for?”

“Take a break kid, special order for you.” She loaded up a tray with an extra slice of turkey and pressed it into his hands. “Take this and go out there. Bring it to our friend. You’ll know who.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” she steered him towards the dining area, winking at

one of the staff who smiled as they went by. "Take a break, spread the holiday cheer." She pushed him out into the dining area then turned and went right back to the kitchen.

"Uh..." Mike stood stock still, taken aback by the sudden change and glancing at the patrons of the soup kitchen with no small alarm.

He had never been around people like this and he cast his eyes over them. He recognized one kid from school who kept his face down as he ate with a woman who shared his button nose. It was scanning past them that he thought he realized what Barb was talking about.

He walked up to the table. "What are you doing here?"

Steve turned and his eyes lit up. "Oh good, you're here." He turned to his companion. "Barb'll take you back, ok? Have fun!"

"Wait, what? Steve?" Mike was starting to feel like he was the butt of some joke he was missing as Steve walked by and pat the younger boy's shoulder on his way out.

"Mike."

He froze and nearly dropped his tray because the person taking off the hat and pulling down the scarf was

"El?"

"Mike!" she grinned, looking none the worse since the last time they had talked. It was her, down to the buzzcut that still hadn't grown in.

"El? You're alive?" Mike dropped the tray on the table with a clatter.

She giggled, "Steve said surprise!" She poked his face.

Slowly, like he had almost forgotten how, Mike felt a smile creep across his face. "El, it's you!"

She nodded, then finally seemed to see the tray. "Turkey?"

He looked down. "Oh, uh," he turned back and saw Barb watching him. She nodded and pointed at the tray then to El. "Oh, yeah, I

guess it's yours."

"Turkey!" El seemed happy as he slid the tray over. She was reaching for the meat with her gloves still on when Mike remembered himself.

"Wait! Uh, you should use these." For a moment, Mike felt really self-conscious teaching El how to use the fork to hold down the meat as she sawed it into smaller pieces, then use it to stick the food in her mouth. He wondered if it was suspicious until he noticed that he was the only one who kept looking around. It wasn't quiet, but most people kept to themselves, eyes focused on their food as they ate.

"El what happened?" he asked, trying to keep his voice low. "You saved us. At the school. But then you disappeared."

El frowned as she stopped chewing and swallowed. "Cold. Upside... Upside Down. Water." She shivered.

"You know what, it's ok, never mind. I can't believe it. You're alive. You have to come back with us! I can show you to the – wait, the agents," Mike remembered even as El shook her head.

"No."

"No? El? You don't want to come back?"

Panic seemed to flash across her face. "No. Yes? No?"

He held up his hands. "It's ok. Just...why?"

"Not safe," she said firmly. "Hop said not safe."

"Hop? Chief Hopper? He knew?" Mike seethed. Hopper knew about El the whole time and didn't say anything?

El nodded though and said, "Hop says protect. Safe with Hop. No bad people. No Papa."

Mike wanted to argue that, but it was only two weeks ago that he had to rebuild the fort because the agents tore it apart trying to find traces of El. And in the end, his father went along with everything the agents said, saluting and all, with his mother following his lead.

“Maybe he’s right,” he admitted.

“Blood?”

“Huh?” Mike blinked, alarmed until he realized she was dubiously tapping the red slime on one dish. “Uh, I think it’s cranberry sauce. I think. It’s supposed to be sweet. Here, uhm, trying taking a bit like this and smear it all over the turkey. That’s what I like to do. Try it!”

Her eyes lit up as she took the first bite. “Hmm. Good!”

“Right?”

Mike didn’t know how long they sat there, even after El finished her food. They talked about the rest of the party, about living with Chief Hopper, about how Barb had been the one to find her and Steve had started spending time with her when Hop wasn’t home. He didn’t completely understand everything, but El was alive and it made him so happy seeing her here, getting to eat real food and enjoying themselves, even with the cold settling in.

“You guys about done here?”

Mike turned, “Barb. You knew?”

“Yeah...” she sat down. “Hopper was being a hardass about it, but I think he has a point. You promise you can keep this a secret? Even from the others?”

“Secret?” El looked troubled.

“Sorry, El,” Barb told her. “Hop’s already going to be mad at us. So you can’t let anyone else know, even the other members of your club.”

“The Party?” She nodded, clicking her teeth as she snapped her fingers at him. “But...”

“Seriously, Mike. The less people know, the less of a risk to her safety. She already disappeared once. You think those suits would think twice to make her disappear, again?” He couldn’t fault her logic. Seeing she had made her point, she promised, “I know you and

El are really close, Steve and I'll try to talk to Hopper, because the way they live now is...ehhh," she waggled her hand skeptically. "But you gotta promise. Even if you have to lie to the others."

Mike took a breath, but El said it painstakingly, "Friends don't lie." They both turned to look at her and then back at each other.

"It's not that easy, El," Barb said, as she got up. She patted the younger girl's shoulder. "But you're absolutely right. Friends *shouldn't* lie." To Mike she added, "I've got cleanup, then we're going to go and take El home. Ok? So, use your time wisely. And El? Happy holidays."

She grinned as El nodded and solemnly said, "Happy holidays," back.

## 9. The First Semester After Part 1

### Summary for the Chapter:

The gang makes a new "friend."

"Now, this'll be on the final, so make sure you remember how to use these formulas," the teacher was saying.

Barb poked Steve from her seat behind him. The boy started and his pen slipped off his lip with a rattle, but nobody really paid them any mind. No one did, anymore. "You got that?" she asked.

"Yeah..." Steve sighed as the bell rang. With math class finished, they headed for the gym.

Barb wrapped up looking through a page of notes. "Looks good, Steve." She passed back what he took down from the last class. "Just review it once every few days and I think you'll be ready,"

"Wheee, gold star for me," Steve crammed the paper into his bag.

Barb made a face, "Oh come on Steve, it's not that bad."

"Yeah. I guess." He tried to put some genuine appreciation into his voice, "Thanks. I know I'm not great at this stuff, but you're helping."

"Just call me 'pointdexter,'" she said loftily, pushing her glasses up her nose.

"No. That's mean. I get that now. And I know you're just helping cuz Nancy asked, but..."

Barb bumped shoulders. "Oh come on Steve. Jonathan's right, you need to stop putting yourself down. It'll look good on my college application that I can say I helped tutoring. Ok? Mutually beneficial."

He scratched at his head. "That's the good one right? Not the one with the missiles from Mexico right?" He was getting better at schoolwork with the other's help, but, being honest with himself, the longer the words Barb and Nancy pushed him to handle, the more he



floundered.

Barb chuckled a bit. "Close, but yes, Steve. Mutually beneficial. It means it's good for us both. Nice to see you've been paying attention in Mrs. Click's class, though. We'll make a student out of you yet."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Steve waved as he opened the gym door and headed in. Barb turned around. She had art this semester and that meant backtracking a bit to reach the art and music wing.

"OOF!"

"Woah, sorry," Barb helped the student she walked into stand up and the smaller girl rolled her eyes.

"What, you so obsessed with King Steve you not watching where you're going anymore?"

Barb sighed and rolled her eyes. "Oh, for fucks sake, he's still dating Nancy. Not me. And, no. I am not interested." Barb shuddered, the thought of it was just so weird in all the wrong ways.

"...what?" the girl she ran into asked.

"You know what, forget I said anything," the rumors Tommy kept making up must have gotten to her, Barb reflected. The fact that they kept getting more and more lewd was just disgusting, but after the Demogorgon, Barb literally could not care other than find them a nuisance. "Sorry for running into you," she added for manner's sake before she left the girl gaping after her in the hall. She did not have the time or energy for the school rumor mill anymore.

"Mr. Boushebel said it was so good, he'd give me a pass on it being tardy!" Nancy told them of her paper over lunch.

"Oh nice!" Jonathan held up his hand and they high fived.

"Good job Nance!" Steve pulled her shoulder close and planted a kiss on her giggling cheek.

“And it’s thanks to you Barb,” Nancy grinned. “I swear, just not having Mike at home was like a cloud was lifted.”

“Eh, he’s not too bad,” Barb said, stabbing at her fries with a fork while she held a book open (the dragon on the cover made it clear it wasn’t a textbook) in her free hand.

“Seriously. It’s like he’s a different person again. He smiled this morning. Like, honest to goodness, he was happy.” Nancy shook her head in disbelief as Steve winked at Barb over her head.

And then it was business like usual. Jonathan, Steve, and Nancy carried the conversation with a few words from Barb here and there. She was content just to relax in their company with a book like she had done when it was just her and Nancy for years. True, there were more boys this time, but it was turning out to be so much better and worse at the same time than the idle fantasies she and Nancy shared in middle school about what dating would be like. For one thing, Barb was very good about keeping her peeking at Jonathan over the pages of her book discreet. It was easier that he only ever seemed to watch Nancy anyways...

That day, Steve went to the trouble of gathering up everyone’s trays and returning them. It was something that he decided one day that nice boyfriends should do and, at some point, he ended up doing it for Jonathan and Barbara too. Today, his path took him past Tommy’s table and he very nearly went flying as his former friend stuck a leg out.

“Ah, uh, uh!” Steve managed to keep the trays in hand and skip his way back to balance as Tommy flipped him off. “Fuck you too, Tommy.” But it was a toothless retort. Steve liked spending time with Jonathan, Nancy, and Barb. The first week after the Demogorgons, it was nice to see that they all still had a connection when they caught him before school and brought him up to speed on Tommy’s latest dickbaggery. It still hurt though, to think how quickly Tommy was willing to turn on him and how much he held Steve to blame for Carol’s disappearance.

“Weren’t you two friends?”

Steve turned to the girl in line before him at the tray return. "Was," Steve rubbed his nose. "Now I'm less of an asshole." He blinked. "I think. Is that an asshole thing to say?"

The shorter girl grimaced and rolled her eyes. "Whatever dingus."

And that was another thing. Seemingly overnight, Steve had lost the crown of Hawkins High School. With Tommy's malice-driven rumors, he became an untouchable; someone with a reputation for actual danger so long as Tommy pushed the narrative that he made Carol disappear somehow.

"Uhhh, dingus huh?" Steve hadn't heard that before. "That's different." It was better than "psychopath" and "murderer."

The first week back to school, administration had the four of them specifically pulled aside. They each spoke to the counsellor separately and recounted the same cover story Hopper coached them on and had delivered to the school himself. Hopper went so far as to tell them all to avoid saying different details as they corroborated so they didn't all sound like zombies and get the school to ask any uncomfortable questions.

As it was, the teachers who didn't care didn't make school any different. The ones who did were torn between wiping two girl's names from the class rosters and the official story from Hawkins PD. They took a reformed Steve Harrington at face value and struggled to keep Tommy Hagan in line as he became worse than ever. For his part, Tommy seemed to take Steve's place everywhere except on the basketball court lineup and everyone else who didn't seem to want to be involved in the drama gave the four new friends a wide berth.

One day though, the rumors just stopped. Like a switch had been hit, by December, the gossip was already about the winter formal, what with the Demogorgon's weirdness cancelling the Sadie Hawkins dance the month before. Word on the street was about the newest fashion lines, which girls went and did the Sadie Hawkins thing anyways, and who was going to be the new prom queen now that Carol and Steve were out of the picture.

Like nothing had ever happened.

Two weeks before finals and winter break, Steve was sitting in Mrs. Click's class drumming his fingers on the desk, only half-listening to the recording of Martin Luther King Junior's "I Have a Dream" speech. He crimped the napkin for the bagel he finished earlier, already tired of hearing this thing again. It felt like the only thing the classes taught about the 1960s was this one speech and the Cold War. Steve was bored out of his mind.

At the end of the recording, one girl raised her hand. "But Mrs. Clark, aren't we going to talk about the Civil Rights Movement at all?"

The teacher clapped her hands together. "Bless you, I wish we could." Then her brow furrowed. "Unfortunately, the Board of Education couldn't fit it into the curriculum this year...if you have any questions though, why don't we talk after class?"

Steve turned to see who the hell would want *more* stuff to study. It wasn't until the girl turned to see him stare at her and ask, "What dingus?" that he remembered her from lunch the other day.

"Nothing," Steve rolled his shoulders and stretched as the bell rung. He grabbed the crumpled napkin and binned it on the way out. All the while he felt the girl's eyes on him and wondered what her deal was.

Nancy wasn't there when they gathered for lunch, but that was hardly unusual. Out of all of them, she threw herself into her schoolwork the most and was spending a lot of time talking to the teachers after class lately. When she bounced up to the table, they quickly found out why.

"So. I was talking to Mrs. Clark and she said that she couldn't, but since Mr. Grifford said he would support us, she'd talk to Mrs. Hamilton!"

Steve swallowed his bite of burger. "Support what?"

“The journalism club idea!” Nancy had that shrewd look on her face again.

Barb closed her book, “Really?” she sounded surprised, and shifted in her seat. “We’re still doing that?”

Nancy frowned, “You’re not thinking of backing out are you?” she asked as the other girl shook her head no.

“It’s just, my dad finally rescheduled work so he can take me to the shooting ranges after school.”

Nancy’s face fell. “Crap, I didn’t think about that.”

“...I guess I could ask my dad if we could do the weekends?”

“No. No, it’s ok. We’ll think of something.”

“Remind me why we’re doing a journalism club again?” Steve begged. “Well, I know why you are Nance, but...”

“It’s the best excuse we can get to try and figure out what the lab’s doing around town!” his girlfriend reminded him.

“Oh,” Steve said the wheels in his head turning.

Nancy turned to Jonathan, “Tell me you’re still up to it.”

He blinked once. “Of course,” saying it like it was obvious.

“Hey, I’ll help too!” Steve threw out there. “Never said I wasn’t going to.”

Nancy gave him a weird look. “Of course, Steve. No one said you wouldn’t. And I’ve got the perfect idea for a first issue to help us look into things.”

Barb raised her book to her face, hiding her frown behind its pages as Nancy launched into her grand scheme.

“Thanks again!” Nancy waved as she closed the door to the band

director's office.

Jonathan fiddled with his camera and then gave her a thumbs up. "Alright we should be good."

"Our third interview, already! Should be pretty straightforward to add this like a newsletter?" Jonathan nodded agreement.

"What are you dorks doing?" Nancy and Jonathan turned to see one of the band members standing there with her arms crossed, watching them curiously.

"Hi!" Nancy stepped forward. "We're starting a new journalism club and putting together a school newsletter!"

"Huh. I thought that club died out."

"Which is why we're starting a new one." Dialing up it up to 100, Nancy plastered a smile on her face and leaned in too close for comfort. "Want to join?"

The other girl started to lean away, then pushed Nancy back. "Yeah. Sure, why not?"

Nancy's face fell. "Nancy?" Jonathan asked.

"Oh. I wasn't expecting you to agree," she admitted sheepishly.

"Uh-huh," the other girl uncrossed her arms and held out her hand. "Robin. And you two are the infamous Nancy and Jonathan."

"Uhh..." the two of them traded looks.

"What?"

"You already knew about us?" Nancy asked.

The girl crossed her arms impatiently. "Yeah."

"And...you still want to hang out with us," Jonathan tried to clarify.

She huffed. "That's what I said, didn't I?"

The other two traded another look. “Why?” they blurted together.

“We’re not exactly the most popular kids around lately,” Jonathan added. The four of them barely seemed to interact with anyone else these days. No one dared reach out to them with Tommy still on the warpath, carrying a grudge for Steve’s “betrayal.”

“Unless you count Steve?” Nancy asked.

The other girl grimaced. “Ugh, that dingus? No, ew. Gag. Ugh. No. Just, no.”

“Oh. Well, I guess we’ll catch you around once we get everything set up!” Nancy tried to end the conversation and inch away.

But the other girl followed her every step. “So is it just the three of us then? Do I need to recruit anyone else?”

“NO!” Jonathan and Nancy looked to each other and he waved her on. “We’re still figuring things out. It’s the four, oh, I guess, five of us now.”

“Cool, can you tell me more about it?”

Nancy gave Jonathan a pleading look, but he just shrugged. “Why don’t we show you?”

“Welcome back,” Barb said, trying to pull apart two cables. “That was fast,” she did a double take, then kicked Steve.

“Oof! What was that fo – “ he began, getting up, only to point at their new friend. “You!”

“Me! Hi. It’s Robin by the way,” the blonde waved at him with a vicious grin.

“Robiiiiiiin?” Steve hissed through his teeth. “Huh. Why are you here?”

“I’m here to join your little dorks club,” Robin waggled her fingers

like she was mocking delight at the prospect.

“Uh...ok....why?”

“Why not dingus?”

“Can you, not?” Nancy pleaded. “With the name calling? We’re not fourth graders here.”

Robin rolled her eyes. “Fine.” She pointed at Steve. “You’re still a dingus though.”

“That’s kinda the one I was hoping you’d drop,” Nancy kneaded her brows.

Barb threw her hands up in the air. “What is going on?”

“Someone else is interested in the club,” Nancy declared, louder for the other two’s benefit, trying to signal the plan was already off the rails.

“Yeah. I’m super interested in writing and....ok, I’m really not. But I can do a music column,” Robin threw out.

“So why are you interested in this?” Barb asked.

“I’m curious, sue me. I wanted to know what could bring the lone wolf Byers, Bump the church girl,” she pointed to Barb, “and the next class president together with “The Hair” Harington.”

“Oh, they still call me that?” Steve smiled.

“Steve,” Barb and Nancy groaned as one.

“Nancy, I could see doing the journalism thing. But the rest of you?” She craned around to look at what Steve had been doing before they came in. “I didn’t think you could handle a pocket calculator, dingus. You really putting a computer together?”

“What is it with you calling me that?” Steve growled, good mood already spoiled.



She shrugged. "I call 'em like I see 'em."

Off to the side, Barb whispered to the others, "How did this happen?"

"I don't know," Nancy mumbled, arms over her face.

"What happened between you and Tommy anyways?" Robin wondered. "One day you're thick as thieves, the next Tommy says you're sleeping with anything that has legs AND you'll stick in a knife in their back."

"Woah, that is definitely, not –"

"Even him." Robin, pointed her thumb at Jonathan who blinked and pointed to himself.

"Hey!"

"Steve," Barb groaned as she collapsed into a seat. "We've heard it all before. We *know* none of its real." Robin raised her eyebrow at that and Barb shook her head. This was not how she intended to spend the afternoon before her first visit to the gun range with her father. "Can we just not? We're trying to put together a school newspaper, not a gossip rag."

"Pft," Steve pointed at Robin, "She's the one starting it!"

"And I'm ending it." Nancy, grabbed Robin's sleeve. "Sorry, looks like you're not a good fit here. It's probably better for if you aren't seen with us anyways."

"Woah, hey, hands off," Robin pulled out of her grip. "Ok, geeze, sorry. I'm sorry, all right. I...should've watched my mouth. Things have been weird lately, ok? I just...I just want to know what's going on." She hunched in on herself.

"Wait," Jonathan blinked. "You, you were friends with Tammy Thompson aren't you?" Robin nodded miserably. "It makes sense," he breathed softly into the silence.

"Who?" Steve asked, earning a fresh death glare from the mysterious girl. "Whoa, I'm just asking..."

“Steve,” Nancy caught his attention. “She’s the other girl that went missing in November,” she reminded him bleakly.

“Oh. Shit.” He slowly raised his hands to his head. “Shit, shiiiiit,” he gasped as Nancy nodded, resigned.

“You know something,” the accusation was dark as the expression on Robin’s face as she drew herself up.

“Not really,” Barb glared at Steve to pull it together as she stepped in. “We’re trying to figure out and close the case on Carol’s disappearance.”

“Barb!” Nancy hissed.

“What? It’s true,” Barb met her friend’s glare just as fiercely. “We don’t know *exactly* what happened to Carol Perkins and made Tommy such an asshole. If Robin can help us figure out what’s going on, then why not?” Barb seemed to have a plan and Nancy was willing to follow her lead, so she nodded unhappily.

Robin crossed her arms. “...you *really* don’t know what happened to Carol?”

Barb looked over to Robin. “She stayed the night at Steve’s and when they,” she pointed to Steve and Nancy, “woke up, she was gone. Just like that. Left her purse and everything.”

Robin gave her a hard look, then nodded slowly. “Like all the other people around town. One day they’re here, the next they’re gone. And no one’s talking about it. Isn’t that weird?” She looked over at Jonathan, “But your brother. He was the only one they found last month. What gives?”

Jonathan raised his hands so Nancy tried to take the heat off him.

“Hawkins PD found him, but they came with the feds,” Nancy volunteered. She hoped she was reading Barb right. Feeding Robin just enough information to keep the girl’s suspicion off of them to keep this from blowing up in their faces on day one was going to be tricky. “Right Jonathan? They didn’t want you to say anything.”

Catching on, the lanky boy nodded. “They had me and my mom sign a bunch of papers too. Hush money, too. So, you can’t let anyone else know we told you this or we’re going to catch a lot of crap.”

Seeing Robin hesitate and nod made Nancy want to cheer for Jonathan. They might get away with this.

“So...” Robin said, “I’ll help you guys and you’ll help me?”

“For Carol,” Nancy nodded, then her shoulders sagged. “Sorry, Steve,” she added and Robin looked over.

Robin mollified seeing the unhappiness etched onto Steve’s face before he turned away. “...sorry from me too.”

Steve finally uncrossed his arms and jammed his hands in his pockets for lack of a better distraction. It was clear using Carol’s death as an excuse here was bringing back fresh trauma. “...It’s whatever.”

Robin bit her lip and walked over to stick her hand out. “Look, I know how much it sucks having your best friend disappear and how freaky it is. I was a jerk...I’m sorry.”

Steve finally looked at her and then took her hand and shook it. “Yeah...Sorry it happened to you too.”

They nodded to each other and Barb prayed that this wasn’t going to go south.

## 10. The First Semester After Part 2

Somehow, Steve, Barb, and Robin got the boxy computer working and it was a good thing because no one was willing to try the old typewriter Mrs. Clark dug out of storage. While they figured out how to hook everything up, Nancy dragged Jonathan along to interview the staff after school on the days they agreed to meet. Once they wrapped up the interviews, Nancy dropped a few innocuous questions here and there. At the end of one session with the lunch staff, Nancy traded a look with Jonathan and they went back to others.

“Hey guys, Robin,” Nancy nodded.

“Yo,” Robin gave her an offhanded wave as she typed up a draft Barb edited and passed onto her. She tried not to be sullen over the fact that she still wasn’t one of the “guys” apparently.

“Just finished up with the lunch ladies, Barb can you help me organize these notes?”

Jonathan grabbed Steve because developing photos was the perfect excuse to tell him. Nancy opted to scribble out her news on top of the notes and point Barb to it with raised brows. “Robin, how much longer can you stay tonight?” she asked while Barb scanned through and started writing what looked to be an action plan on a fresh page of paper.

The other girl looked up at the clock and blew out her lips. “Till four. I have lessons tonight so I can’t stay late.”

“That’s fine. I think we’re done for today anyways.” Nancy turned back to scribbling on her notes with Barb. Behind her, Robin’s eyes narrowed at the sight of them intently writing and shaking their heads or nodding at whatever they were writing.

She finished typing up the story and set it aside. “You guys finish with that? Can’t be much longer than this. Hand it over and I’ll finish up and I can get going.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Barb told her, immediately gathering the notes and sliding them into a folder. “We’ll finish up tomorrow. Once Steve and Jonathan get back with the pictures, I think we’ll be ready to hand Mrs. Hamilton the first newsletter.”

“...anything else I can do?”

Nancy gave her a smile that Robin suspected was just a hair too cheerful for the girl. “Nope, you’re free to go today! See you tomorrow!” They both waved.

A part of Robin badly wanted to call them out on their bullshit here and there. They hadn’t even tried to hide it the first day mentioning that NDA with Jonathan’s family and it irked her that even Harrington was in on it. She was sorely tempted, but another idea hatched in her mind. “Alright,” she wrapped up on the computer and grabbed her bag. “See you around.”

“See you!” “Bye Robin.”

A short while later, the boys came back in. “Robin went home early?” Steve asked. He had that grim expression on his face Nancy hadn’t seen since the night of the Demogorgon ambush. She nodded as he and Jonathan sat at the table.

“So...the janitor swears he was hearing something shrilling in the kitchens when he checked?”

“Could be rats,” Barb suggested like she had written to Nancy, trying to be the voice of reason.

Both Nancy and Jonathan shook their heads. “They told us he said it wasn’t like any rat he’d heard in twenty years,” she informed the others.

Steve shook his head. “But no way one of the Demogorgons could fit in a hole that size.”

“That’s the thing,” Nancy agreed as Jonathan shoved a picture across the table at Barb.

She picked it up and blinked. "What am I looking at it? It's just a small ho – wait, that's the freezer door? It's solid metal!"

"No way that's a rat," Jonathan emphasized as he nodded agreement.

Nancy added, "remember the refrigerator at Steve's?"

The taller boy shuddered. He had literally been inches from death. "Trying not to..." he muttered.

"But you're right, it's too small for a Demogorgon to fit," Barb murmured, thinking hard. After a moment, she looked to Jonathan. "Those eye things your mom and Hopper fought, how big were they again?"

"She said they were the same size."

"So it can't be one those then either..." Barb sighed.

"What if they can shrink?" Jonathan asked. "We don't know everything about these things."

"Why bother tearing open a hole when they can just pop out the wall?" Barb pointed out. "This just doesn't make sense."

"Shouldn't we be telling Hop?" Steve suddenly asked, the question bringing a lull to their discussion.

"...shouldn't we?" Barb wondered. Nancy shared looks with her, but Jonathan shook his head. "...well, it's not like they did anything to help the last time."

"We should make sure first," Nancy suggested. "Get proof."

Jonathan crossed his arms. "It's not like they listened to us the last time we tried to show them proof. Hell, they didn't believe us even when we did!" He was still rankled by the officers. Jonathan respected what they did facing down the other Demogorgon that night, but he also remembered Hopper's two cop friends in particular from the night they delivered the news about finding Will's "body" down in the quarry.

“So what do we do?” Steve asked.

“The lunch ladies said that they’re going to hire an exterminator over break,” Nancy played with her hair. “...how do you guys feel about doing a hands on investigation?”

Barb sighed as the boys nodded. Well it wasn’t like she could leave them and let them get into trouble without her was it? “I’m in too.”

Barb had impressed her father at the practice so much, that when he was paged for some emergency at work, he went ahead and let her drop him off at the office and take the guns home with her. Triumphant, she pulled into the parking lot of the school near the corner where the other three and their cars waited.

“Guess what I have!” she practically sang.

“You’re happy,” Steve laughed, taken aback. “Huh,” he added as she pulled out the practice rifles her father entrusted her with.

“We fired blanks tonight, but my father left some live rounds with me!” Barb held out one rifle for Nancy.

“Thanks Barb. Ugh, it’s so much heavier than the pistol.”

Nancy was awfully proud of swiping a set of keys and letting them in as they settled down in a corner of the cafeteria. Keeping their voices soft, adrenaline and a certain kind of thrill settled into each of them, even Barb, as they hunkered down and waited. And waited. And waited.

An hour later, Jonathan was asleep at the table as Nancy, Steve, and Barb tried to pass the time.

“Never have I ever...walked in on my parents having sex.”

Barb cringed and lowered a finger. “Oh Barb,” Nancy sighed as Steve guffawed.

“I wanted to claw my eyes out right then and there,” Barb whispered,

kicking Steve in an effort to get him to shut up. She never actually did share that awkward moment with Nancy. Some things were just better left unsaid. “Never have I ever peed my pants,” Barb shot back, grinning as Steve stopped laughing, turned red and lowered a finger.

“It was in third grade, ok?”

“Relax Steve, only the whole school was talking about it.”

“Man, we were horrible kids,” Nancy sucked on her lip thinking about it.

Barb adjusted her glasses loftily, “Actually according to the data, by that I mean your brother and his friends by the way, all kids are pretty horrible.”

“Except El,” Steve said without thinking. Then he stopped short as Barb shot him a look.

“Yeah, she was a pretty good kid wasn’t she?” Nancy’s cheer faded as she glumly ruminated on the lab escapee.

Steve sagged and over Nancy’s melancholic pondering gave Barb a sad face. She shook her head very slightly, warning him off. Hopper’s temper had been restrained, but he made it very clear after Thanksgiving, no one else outside of he, Flo, Steve, Barb, and now Mike was to know that he was sheltering El in his cabin. The chief’s anger aside, on the way home, she and Steve made bets on how long until Callahan and Powell, would figure out. Still, if only for Hopper’s fraying peace of mind, she warned Steve off and he sighed, slumping against his chair, sending it skidding along the tile.

Barb and Nancy immediately perked up. Under the sound of Steve’s chair, the rattling that began in the kitchen resolved itself into the familiar sound of a bowl spinning to rest on the ground.

Barb poked Jonathan awake as Steve and Nancy got to their feet, Steve swinging his nail bat up and ready. “Showtime,” he grinned humorlessly.



“Get it, get it, get it! AaaaaaaaAAAAH!” Barb managed to hop on a counter as she felt something *cold* crawl over her foot, even through the shoe. She kicked wildly, hearing a moist plop as the thing dislodged and hit the wall.

“Lights! Where are the lights?” Nancy called from somewhere in the depths of the kitchen as Steve cursed and shook the flashlight that must have broke when he dropped it.

“Hold still!” Jonathan barked as he swung the bat. Barb held her breath, only for his curse and the scrabble of something across the tiles to tell her he missed.

“What is it?” Nancy ran by, feeling useless. She didn’t dare fire the rifle, it was just as likely she’d hit one of the others in the darkness.

“It’s cold, and ugh, slimey!” Barb wailed.

“Steve, three o clock!” Jonathan called, Steve turned and raised his bat only for Jonathan to yelp, “No, wait your nine! Shit!” Trying to stop, he slipped on something. As he skidded across the sudden slickness on the ground, he knocked Steve’s legs out from under him and both boys went down.

Barb gingerly stepped back on the ground to help, only for the thing to skitter over her *other* foot with a dismayed shriek. “It’s making a break for it!” she realized as she tried to run for the moonlit doorway.

“Don’t let it get away!” Nancy was right on her heels.

They ran for it, Barb trying hard to make out more than the thing’s stubby tail as it darted from shadow to shadow. Nancy and the boys followed her huffing and puffing through the school all the way out to the parking lot where they almost ran into her backing off.

“Guys...” she warned, they realized that something out there was illuminating the wide-eyed expression on her face.

“Kids, out of the school now,” boomed a familiar voice.

Nancy’s face screwed up with an “ah crap” as Steve let the bat fall to

his side with a side.

“All four of you. Now.”

They filed out to face the music as Powell shook his head at them. It was the fourth person Callahan kept a firm grip on from behind Hopper that made them double take.

“Shit,” Steve muttered.

“What the hell are those?” Robin asked in a strangled squeak as her eyes darted from the boys’ nail and barb-wire wrapped bats to the practice rifles Barb and Nancy held.

“Hoy!” Powell exclaimed, his cry punctuated by a gunshot that made them all jump. The man suddenly ran off, handgun out as he fumbled with his belt and turned on a flashlight.

“He saw it!” Jonathan realized.

“Hey, HEY!” Hopper bellowed as the kids ran off after the other officer. “Get back here kids! Get back! SHIT!” He threw his hat down.

“Well this is a right old hootenanny,” Callahan idly observed.

“Shut up, Callahan,” Hopper sighed as he groaned and bent for his hat.

“What the hell is going on?” Robin blurted out. After being dragged to the police station, with the cops on one side of the questioning room and the other four teens on the other, Robin felt trapped in the middle.

“Yeah, what the hell is going on?” Hopper gave the other four, Barb and Steve in particular, the stink eye. He still wasn’t over the stunt they pulled over Thanksgiving.

“Journalism project,” Nancy promptly answered.

When Hopper closed his eyes and rubbed at them without so much as

a curse, Powell took note of his trembling shoulders and tensing free hand. “Kids,” he warned, “You better think twice about how you gonna answer.”

Nancy opened her mouth to say something, took a look at Hopper, and closed it with a clack of her teeth.

Taking a deep breath, Hopper opened bloodshot eyes and glared at Nancy with such bile she shrank against Steve. “Let’s try this again. Tell me why we found you when the school cafeteria’s new alarm system was tripped.” After a beat of silence, he asked shortly, “Well?”

“Hop...” Barb tried and failed, wilting as Hopper glared at her. Any and all goodwill earned helping with El and making the young girl adjust to her new life seemed to have gone out the window this evening.

Jonathan ended up speaking up, cool as a cucumber as he took Hopper’s glare without a flinch. “The lunch ladies said something got into the freezer. We were trying to do some investigating for the school paper.”

“School paper?”

Jonathan waved at them and, with a sigh, at Robin. “Hawkin’s High School’s new Journalism Club.”

Hopper’s eyes danced to the lone teenager sitting apart from the rest then he rested his head on the table. The kids jumped as he proceeded to knock his head against it repeatedly.

“Chief?” Powell asked, concerned.

“Why can’t this ever be fucking simple?” Hopper bemoaned as he got to his feet. “You lot, are waiting here,” he pointed to Robin, “And you, are coming with – “

“NO!” Robin slammed the table, a nerve finally having snapped. “Not until you tell me what that “duo gorgon” did with Tammy!”

With that, a frigid silence settled into the room.

“Where did you hear that?” Hopper asked, looking breathless.

She pointed to the other kids, “All of you are keeping secrets and I don’t buy any of it.” Then she turned her finger on the cops, “And you know something too. I’m sick of you hiding and running away every time I come in. Don’t LIE!” she yelled as Powell opened his mouth.

The deputy chief turned to Hopper, brows raised. For his part, Hopper turned to the other teenagers who seemed to close ranks immediately. “What did you lot go running your mouth about now?”

The story about investigating a pest problem came spilling out and Hopper shook his head. News of that had filtered through to the station, but he hadn’t thought it serious. Then they mentioned metal torn open like cardboard and Hopper hated the fact that they had settled on the high school to build the bath that night last month. Still, he told himself the idea of that influence being centered at the middle school was infinitely worse. It seemed whatever weirdness the Demogorgon had wrought chasing them there in November had come to roost at last, the lab’s tests be damned.

At the end of their explanation, Powell turned to Hopper. “Remember what we talked about last month, with the Richardsons?” he murmured out the side of his mouth. Hopper nodded, mind racing. Powell was also referring to whatever got the kids worked up and had escaped from them all in the parking lot. He could understand their intentions, but that still didn’t excuse the mess the kids landed them in.

Hopper turned to Robin. “We warned you not to get involved.”

“You mean lied,” Robin snarled, her eyes aflame. “You know what happened, stop dancing around it and tell me the truth!”

Nancy raised her hand, outstretched in an unspoken plea to the other girl. But she seemed to think twice of it even as the aborted gesture caught the others’ eyes and she lowered her hand.

Besides her, Barb assessed the room, seeing that everyone else was watching Robin’s breakdown carefully except for Steve who sat with

his chin to his chest, staring unseeingly at the table. She looked over to Hopper and sent him a plea with her eyes.

The Chief considered his options, weighing the fierce anger in Robin's eyes with her trembling breath. "You followed them to school tonight..." he began.

"And I'll follow them, and you, and them," she pointed to the other officers, "until I learn what the hell happened to Tammy Thompson."

Hopper sighed, and sat back. Doc Perkins and the Thompsons were one thing. He knew that Doc Perkins was leaving Hawkins Memorial Hospital and going into the local ministry. The Thompsons were looking for detectives to figure out what happened with their daughter. Hopper could deflect and manage those. He could do so a certain way he couldn't with this teenager who was stalking the other four students at Hawkins High who knew the truth of the matter. If he let this continue, where would it end up?

Hopper looked her squarely in the eyes and threw caution to the wind. "She's dead. Along with the other thirteen missing from November."

Robin was taken aback. "What?"

"She's dead." The girl turned to look at Steve who finally raised his head at last and also met her gaze levelly. With intense calm, he added, "just like Carol."

"No," she whispered, "no, she can't." She looked to Hopper then Steve, "she...she just wanted to sing..." Robin jammed her hand to her mouth and bit down, tears starting to leak from her scrunched up eyes and rocked in her seat. "No..."

## 11. The First Semester After - Epilogue

The next day, the school was lit up with all sorts of weird rumors about the kitchen, blaming science experiments, the local woodshop teacher with a reputation for perversion, and Tommy Hagan for the scarred and scrapped tiles and the oozy mess. The four students who knew the truth of the matter were ignored and took their lunches outside for once, sitting in the parking lot.

“Robin wasn’t in class this morning,” Steve shared.

“...Do you think it was the right thing to tell her?” Nancy wondered. She hadn’t gotten much sleep. The sight of Robin’s expression crumbling in on itself had brought back nightmares of Carol and the Demogorgon and all the associated guilt. Her boyfriend shrugged wordlessly. They sat next to each other, but stopped short of touching. They hadn’t quite been in the mood to be affectionate all morning.

Barb, like Jonathan said nothing. Though he at least picked at the sandwich his mother had packed. Barb just sat there, thinking about the last night. It had really turned into a shitshow. Hopper had charged Steve, Callahan, and Powell with watching the bewildered Robin and keeping her from leaving while he got Jonathan, Barb, and Nancy home.

Nancy was dropped off discretely at the corner of her cul-de-sac, left to sneak back into her room in shame with Hopper’s frigid warnings and scolding filling her ears. Jonathan was dropped off to an incandescent Joyce Byers who pulled him into the house by the ear and promised Hopper an equally stern talking to the next day. Barb was last with Hopper’s accusation that “You’re supposed to be the smart one!” bouncing around her head. She stood silent and shamefaced as Hopper held up the practice rifles before her parents. He warned her father that he was letting her go this time, but not to leave the guns with her alone again. Hopper at least framed it so that Barb’s fault was speeding, not irresponsible and reckless breaking of gun laws. Still, on his way out, he gave her a tired look that he was sorely tempted otherwise though. Even Steve had a walk of shame. Flo dropped him off on the way to work at the station because his

bimmer, like all their cars, was still untouched in the school parking lot. It was done early enough that most people didn't see, but he had to wait almost a half hour, sitting in his car, until the school opened.

The day passed in a daze. The urgency of finals around the corner did nothing to rouse even Nancy as the four of them went through classes on automatic. Once the final bell rang, they gathered before and unlocked the room they had been assigned and sat down in uncomfortable silence.

At last Nancy couldn't take it anymore and booted up the computer. She put them to work, for all that seeing Robin's neat work that had been saved made her stomach turn.

By the time it was clear the other girl wasn't coming in to confront them here, they had put together a newsletter with pictures and tossed it onto Mrs. Hamilton's desk. Their success in either the newsletter or their investigation turning up fruit was ashes in the wake of the events only a day before.

"My place," Steve declared as they went back to their cars. No one was willing to argue and it sounded more appealing than going home or studying. So it was that they ended up sitting in Steve's living room with the TV going and no one watching as he started boiling water and chopping vegetables.

"You think she'll be back to school soon?" Nancy wondered aloud once she held a plate of Steve's pasta.

Barb considered it for only a moment. "I wouldn't count on it."

In the end, Steve was left with nearly as much pasta as they started with. Seeing them out, there was a peculiar sight that made them all halt at the entranceway.

"Come on! You shouldn't be here," Callahan was telling a spectacled man that only Steve recognized.

Powell looked over at them and sighed. The feeling was mutual; nothing good came of it when they were all together of late. "Sir, you need to come with us, this is private property and you can't be

trespassing.

The man instead followed his gaze then an accusing finger at the teenagers. "Seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless!" he cried out.

"Right, that's enough," Powell wrestled the man into a hold and bodily started carrying him away.

"Doc Perkins?" Steve wondered, the only one who could fight past the astonishment to say anything.

Callahan looked their way, "Just forget you saw that."

Barb raised her brows and folded her arms. "Riiiiiiight."

To her, Callahan said, "Remember what I said the other day." Then, he went to join Powell in the police cruiser and they drove off, Carol's father craning in his seat to point at them as his mouth worked from the back of the car.

"What the hell?" Jonathan managed at last.

"I think," Barb scowled, "I think he was quoting the Bible..."

Steve nodded slowly, "Carol's dad was pretty strict about church."

"Has that ever happened before?" Nancy wondered. "You guys don't think he's still upset at Steve?"

"The lawsuit hasn't gone anywhere," Barb reminded her. "Yet." She had made sure to keep abreast of news of that matter. "Obviously, he still blames Steve for her. There's no other reason he'd be here." She shot Steve a look and sighed. "Look, a while back, I was at the station when Flo came in and said she found threatening letters in your mailbox."

"What?" Steve's eyes popped.

"From him?" Nancy pointed in the direction the police cruiser went. "Why didn't you tell him?" she snapped.



“Don’t blame me! Hopper and Flo didn’t want Steve to worry...” Barb admitted uncomfortably. “They hoped that it would stop there. Me too.”

“Well, they were wrong,” Jonathan sighed.

Nancy gave Steve a worried look “I’ll be fine, Nance. The police station is literally five blocks away!” he promised. Still, he didn’t complain though when they all filed back inside and dragged him along. They ended up making calls and staying the night. By the end of it, the four of them fell asleep huddled together on the massive couch Steve’s parents bought him. The door was locked, curtains closed, lights on, and TV left to go on all night. Before he fell asleep, Steve planted a kiss on Nancy’s head and rested a cheek on Jonathan’s shoulder, so very thankful for his friends.

## 12. The First Winter Break After

### Summary for the Chapter:

Robin has the *worst* winter break until, suddenly, she doesn't.

AKA Robin Buckley is the best thing that happened in Season 3 and I want her in the story STAT. Fight me.

### Notes for the Chapter:

#### Content Warning

Robin lay in bed. She hadn't showered in a few days or cleaned up, but she was just so *tired*. She knew when, but *why* had everything just gone to pot? It was Hawkins fucking Indiana. So boringly predictable, she had it all planned out. Freshman year: be friends with Tammy Thompson. Check. Sophomore year: get her license in order. Still time-gated, but not for much longer. Junior year: get close enough to figure out what Tammy was going to do after graduation. Checked off ahead of schedule. Senior year: graduate with good enough grades that her ex-hippie parents couldn't say no to any of the foreign colleges she researched or opt for a gap year if that wasn't in the cards. In-progress. After graduation: follow Tammy and hope for the best. Fucking nope, and circling the drain. That just left her with her plans somewhere in Europe. Project Croissant was still an option.

OK, it wasn't the best plan, but hey. Robin was 15 going on 16 soon, AIDS was getting scary fast, and Hawkins, Indiana would *literally* kill her if she didn't get out after graduation - assuming her parents ever got a clue when they weren't reminiscing over their golden days traveling from commune to commune across the country. Which was why she said she was hormonal instead of mourning the love of her life like any young, confused lesbian should be entitled to. Still, fear that her parents would somehow, like, smell the gayness on her and the pathetically flimsy excuse that she was on her period meant that her mother forced her out of bed to take the finals that year. Finals that Robin idly doodled on and failed numbly because what even was

the point anymore? Tammy getting killed was so not part of the plan. And, really, did she even have a plan anymore? Was Hawkins going to be where she ended up and died?

Which was how she found herself here, not leaving her room for the better of the first half of winter break. Her parents were clearly befuddled by her uncharacteristic grimness over the holidays. It wasn't like she had she particularly enjoyed "the most wasteful period of capitalistic schmoozing," as she usually put it. Still, the complete lack of reaction to the mouthpiece for her French Horn she specifically asked for and the family's new VHS player and movie tapes left her parents scratching their heads as she retreated to her room.

As the winter break marched by her, Robin sat in her room and thought about her future. Having her heart broken sucked, but the idea of dying here in Hawkins, Indiana was infinitely worse. So, Robin was not inclined to pull a Romeo and Juliet for a girl she just *liked*. She liked Tammy, like, really seriously, struggled through pre-calc with her just to have a chance to talk, liked the other girl. But, in the end, she hadn't gotten close enough to know the other girl other than that 1) objectification aside, *damn* those boobs were real, 2) she had big dreams of singing, and 3) she *would not shut up about Steve fucking Harrington*. In Robin's mind, there was still too much to live for, even if everything seemed hollow with memories of Tammy Thompson pressing down on everything.

In a way, Robin supposed she should be honored she knew the truth. The suspicion the Thompson's planted in her when she visited for news that Hawkins PD knew more than they let on had born right. But what was she supposed to do about it? Everyone who disappeared last month was apparently dead and she never even thought to ask how, so she'd be looking barkers if she went out and started yelling from the rooftops. And hadn't Jonathan mentioned NDAs? A part of her that wanted to spite them, was tempted to see what would happen if she went and blabbed on the big secret. But, with the people involved...would anyone believe her? Worse, what if someone with less patience than the Hawkin's PD got involved?

Thoughts like this pushed her back and forth, swinging from furious outrage to melancholy until eventually it all turned her to an

emotional mess with a need to do *something*. Knowledge of truth of the matter was burning a hole in her chest.

At the edge of the quarry, Robin bent over, gasping for air. She hated running, but there was such a desperate need to move in her bones that she just said she was going out and then took off. Eventually, she realized she kept turning away from parts of the town where'd she run into others and decided to make for the quarry at the edge of town. Standing there, she heaved for breath, then looked down. The wind blew ripples across the placid water down below, everything a bone white as the cold bit into her skin.

"Kid."

She turned and her eyes narrowed. "You."

The younger of the white officers who had captured her that long, long night before break held up his hands and took a single step closer like she was a deer who would bolt at the slightest scare. "Hey. What're ya doing all the way out here in the cold?"

"What do you want?" she snapped, ignoring his question.

He paused, reassessing her. "You ok, kid?"

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. "Do I look ok? Idiot."

"Better than the other night," the officer straightened up. He walked up to her and unceremoniously grabbed her by the arm.

"Ow! Hey! Let go!"

The officer fixed her with a look. "You're not going to do something stupid like jump off the edge over there?"

"What?" Where did that come from? "No!"

She must have said it convincingly because the officer immediately let go and stepped back. "Sorry. Saw you running around like a crazy person and...thought you were so in love with that girl that you were

going to jump off and join her.”

“I wasn’t –“ her blood froze. “What did you say?” The officer raised his brows at her. “I-I don’t. I wasn’t...” Shit. Shit shitshitshit her mind played on repeat.

“You didn’t like Tammy Thompson like that?” he taunted. Robin felt like the ground was falling out from. “Shit, hang on, wait! I’m not going to tell anyone!”

Robin was trembling. “Your’re...you’re not?”

“No...I just had a hunch. And then I see you running across town...in that...” Robin looked down and belatedly realized she hadn’t changed out of the shorts she wore to bed last night. “I followed you out here and thought you were going to...do something dumb.”

Robin’s brain clicked all the pieces together and nervous laughter bubbled out. “What, so you want me to blow you or something? Got a gangbang at the police station planned so I don’t tell the Thompsons?” her brain was back into overdrive. She was alone out here with this man; a complete stranger with the power to make her life a misery now that he knew her secret. Her mouth ran a mile a minute accordingly.

The man screwed up his face, “Wait, what? Ew, gross, just no!”

Robin suddenly realized the entire time, there was something different about this exchange. It was different after talking to others and she realized why as he looked at her, then blinked away. He wasn’t staring at her rack like the boys in band or that perv woodshop teacher who everyone said had mirrors on his shoes to look up girl’s skirts.

“Wait...” she gasped hands going to her mouth. Hope bloomed in her heart. “You’re gay too?”

“Shh!!!” the man went white as snow around them he clapped the hell of his palm against her mouth. They blinked staring at each other as he quickly reddened and lowered his hand. “Don’t just...say it out loud like that.”

“You did it with me,” she pointed out, still jubilant and starting to relax despite her accusation.

He blinked, eyes flicking upward as he thought then, winced. “Ok. Yeah. I did. You’re right. Sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” Robin whispered breathlessly. “I thought I was the only one in Hawkins!”

“I doubt it. Maybe your gaydar is just bad.”

“Hey. You’re the one hiding with the cops!”

He rolled his eyes, “Yeah, yeah. ACAB. My dad was one, just so you know.”

“You didn’t have to be one,” she pointed out.

That made him raise his brows. “Yeah. Actually, I did.”

“Oh.” After a beat she added, “That sucks.”

“Hopper and Powell aren’t bad,” he thought about it. “Ok, maybe I should say they’re the only good ones.”

She had no idea who they were. The other officers from the other night? Dad-bod and the black guy? “You aren’t in love with them, are you?”

He flushed red again. “No.”

So, that was a lie. Interesting... Robin raised a brow, a smile on her lips. “But you’re gay.”

“Most women are just annoying...” Robin raised the other brow and he sighed, “Sorry. Yeah. Ok. You got me. Don’t go blabbing...or they’ll run me out of town.”

She scoffed, “Look, trust me, I know,” she smacked his shoulder, suddenly feeling more freer with herself than she in ages with any boy or girl.

He sighed, “Look, really? You’re ok? I don’t want to see anyone else get hurt on my watch.” Robin was startled at how much younger and older he sounded at the same time as he said it so earnestly. Then he looked at his wrist watch, “Which ended half an hour ago. Huh.”

“You need to go somewhere?”

“No.” He gave her a sideways look. “You like coffee?”

She snorted, “Does Freddie Mercury wear high heels?”

He walked over to his patrol car, parked nearby and opened the passenger side door. “...then let’s have one on me. And...let’s start things over again on the proper foot.” He took his hat in hand. “I’m Phillip Callahan. Call me Phil, only my great aunt still calls me Phillip. I’m,” he swallowed and said quieter, “I’m gay.” He offered her his hand.

She took it, feeling seen and just ecstatic she wasn’t alone in this town anymore. “Robin Buckley, gay teenage disaster.”

He chuckled and went over to open the car door for her, “it’s not just you. Now, come on. I owe you a coffee and an honest talk at least.”

Robin, honest to goodness, squealed and ran over as Callahan felt a smile creep on his face.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Warning for suicidal thoughts, ideation, and an unconsidered but plausible situation for suicide to occur with Robin

Warning for homophobic parents and involuntary outing with Robin

Warning for stalker/kidnapper scare and stranger danger sexism, passing implication of rape with Robin

2022/03/11 - Trying to catch up with what Rebel Robin has to tell us about her. This section may be subject to more changes while I try to twist things into something usable.

## 13. The First New Years After

### Summary for the Chapter:

Barb's life gets a little more complicated and Steve gets his first big taste of living on his own.

With the start of the new year came changes to Barb's congregation like every year. But this year, with the special New Years Sunday service, was the first time it ever mattered. She sat in her seat, gaping as the very man she saw Powell and Callahan drag away from Steve's house weeks ago took the pulpit and raged about useless cops and the wrath of god.

"Isn't the new pastor amazing?" her mother asked on the drive home, swooning like a teenager over George Michael.

"...are you serious?" Barb asked weakly.

"You didn't think so, sweetie?" Her dad asked, shooting her a mildly surprised, questioning look in the rearview mirror. "After the mess that happened back in November, I'm not surprised Father Perkins found his calling like this."

"Can you imagine?" her mother's hand latched onto her father's arm. "Losing your daughter only to have a revelation to do the Lord's divine work?" she cast Barb a melancholic look. She was still obsessed with keeping Barb in sight whenever possible outside the house.

Barb bit her tongue trying to swallow the scathing reminder on it that Doc Perkins had never bothered with food drives or helped with any church sales for charity that helped Hawkins' unfortunate before. Carol had complained at length about always being dragged to church by him to anyone who would or wouldn't listen. Barb would even swear that there was a time when her parents gossiped about how strange a man as rich as the good doctor couldn't find it in him to buy so much as a can of beans for the Christmas can drive.

There was too much going on in her mind. Inwardly she seethed. It



was all too easy for her to interpret Perkin's comments throughout the ceremony as assigning blame in the fallout of the Demogorgon. Especially as it related to the Hawkins PD. Was the "impure darkness plaguing their judgement" Powell, the first black officer ever to rise to deputy chief there? Was the weakness of flesh and temptation to the "gospel of the pill" a comment about the war on drugs, or a jab at Hopper? That bit had been a popular and juicy bit of gossip to her parent's generation the last few years.

She didn't need to mull over the bit about troubled and dangerous youth impinging on the purity and chastity of the community's daughters. It had taken all her will not to stand up and leave because, angry as she was, it wasn't hard to see most of the congregation ate up every word of the sermon. Before, church had dragged on at times. It had been boring and trite for all the banal predictability she never appreciated before. Today though, was the first day Barb seriously wanted to leave the tight knit community and the thought sent tears to her eyes. How could she look at Mrs. Williams, who always baked cookies for the church lunch and gave her extras as a kid for a good job at Sunday school, the same way when she yelled "amen" to a jab about Steve? And what about Mr. Lovell, freshly widowed since November standing and holding his hands in the air as Perkins cursed the "witchcraft of the faithless?" To Barb it was clear that the son of a loveless marriage brought back only to damn the faithful wasn't a fanciful metaphor, but a condemnation of Will being the sole survivor of the Demogorgons preying on Hawkins and, by extension, Joyce and Jonathan.

"Father Perkins is just the kind of man the church needed," her mother was saying. "I can't wait to see what he does this year!"

Barb just sat in the back of her parent's car and stared out the window, trying not to shiver at the thought of the people she grew up buying into Perkin's agenda. Why couldn't they be more obsessed with the charity work Barb thought far more important? Trapped in the car with her parents caught up in the buzz of the Perkin's sermons, she itched for the weight of a gun in her hands and the clarity of a target to shoot at.

Nancy thought it was strange that Steve hadn't called in a couple days, but she had been distracted since Christmas passed. Her mother had gone through the house, saying that cleaning everything would make everyone feel better after the chaos of last year forcing Nancy and Mike to commiserate in their misery. They spent days following their mother's instructions filling boxes with old clothes and toys that neither of them thought would be passed down to Holly. Then with New Years going out to see her grandparents, it felt like she hadn't had a chance to catch her breath over break. So it went that it was incredibly off-putting going to school and not finding Steve. Instead, Robin sat down at his seat at lunch.

She looked around and frowned. "Where's dingus?"

Jonathan nearly dropped the ridiculously fancy camera he said he got for Christmas and Barb froze mid-bite, a couple of fries slipping off her fork. "Robin?" Nancy found herself asking.

"Glad to see you haven't forgotten about me."

"But – you, the..."

The other girl rolled her eyes, "Look, save it for after school. You're in pre-calc right? I bombed the test and can't find my notes. Can I look at yours?"

Their lunch passed like that, with Robin reading the notes and politely ignoring the frantic looks of the other three trying to communicate with just their eyes and furrowed brows. As the bell rang Robin realized she hadn't gotten through half of the meticulous details Nancy had taken down. "Can I borrow these? Mr. Harper said he'd let me redo the test."

"Yeah, sure..." Nancy and the others seemed to expect more so Robin was happy to oblige.

"And I know its Tuesday, but can we meet? At the room?"

Barb adjusted her glasses as she sent the others a questioning look. "Actually...we were planning to go see Steve."

"Good. I want to see him too."

More frantic looks between the other three as the crowd around them buzzed and move to class. When Robin cleared her throat at last, Nancy sighed. "Let's get it over with. Meet us at the parking lot after school."

Robin closed the door to Barb's car and planted her arms on the roof. "I thought Steve lived in Loch Nora," she said conversationally as she examined the apartment building. It didn't seem anything special or scream of the kind of wealth that got Steve his party king title.

"You heard about the fire, right?" Jonathan was the one who spoke up for once.

She snorted, "Next you're going to tell me Harrington's parents aren't loaded enough to just buy a new McManor."

"Apparently, they're in Denmark," Barb remarked.

Which was entirely the problem.

Nancy hadn't hesitated to use her key when Steve didn't the answer door. Inside the apartment...

"Huh, I thought it'd be messier," Robin looked around.

"Shh..." the woman on the couch hissed, holding a finger to her lips.

Robin pointed a finger at Flo. "You! I know you! From the station! The iron maiden!"

"Flo?" Barb was surprised to see her here like this. She hadn't thought the older woman was that close to Steve.

"Iron...maiden?" Jonathan tried to process Robin's comment. Not for the first time, he wondered just how much had she been hounding the police about Tammy.

"Seriously, do you know guys know every officer by name?" Robin couldn't help but wonder.

"I wondered when you kids would be showing up," Flo sighed. "Not you though." She traded heated glares with Robin. "Definitely not you. Please don't tell me she's here to cause a fuss."

Robin crossed her arms. "I'm scrappy. Sue me."

From the back room came a pained moan and Flo shook her head.

"Steve?" Nancy was already rushing to the door. "Are you hurt?"

Following the others more sedately, Robin watched Flo get up and pour out a cup of water. "If he's hurt, he's no one to blame but himself," the older woman sighed. The way she said it though, the comment came out sad.

Steve moaned again. "Steve? Steve!" Nancy shook him.

"Too...loud," he managed to groan and tried to retreat into the covers.

Barb sniffed the air and sighed, rubbing her head. "Steve, I thought you stopped drinking." The window was open, but there was definitely still the whiff of alcohol under the smell of unwashed, sweaty teen boy that made her head ache.

"News to me," Robin muttered. From her place at the door, she could see the row of empty bottles, lined on the sink, as Flo passed them.

"What happened?" Jonathan asked Nancy, "Do you know why he's like this?"

Nancy just shook her head. Then Flo stuck her head in the room. "Given how drunk he is, how about you give him some space?" Nancy was the last to leave him, reluctant, as Flo dug Steve out and handed him the water. "No pills. Not sure you didn't poison yourself drinking yourself under like that."

"...Sorry Flo."

She clucked and shook her head, "Silly boy. Nothing to apologize for. Talk to someone though will you? One of them, Nancy even. You promised you wouldn't end up like Hopper."

Steve finished the water and nodded, before hiding in the covers again.

Once she closed the bedroom door, Flo turned to look at the kids. "And you lot promise you won't let him drink another drop?" She sighed as they nodded. "You kids have good hearts, for all that Hopper's been mad since last month. Try not to do anything dumb ok? I actually like you kids," she admitted as she put on her coat. "There's a bake and meatloaf in the fridge. Make sure he eats something solid."

They agreed to give Steve an hour, and while they waited, got out their homework. Robin was the only one to apply herself to it and considerately put in her headphones, blaring her music so that the other three could freely whisper out a plan. Finally, a hand on her arm brought her out of it. "What's up losers?"

Nancy twitched, trying to ignore Robin's abrasive manner. After everything, she was willing to give the other girl that much. "We talked about it, and...we'll answer any questions you have, about November, if you can promise – "

Robin shook her head. "Thanks, but I'm good."

Nancy looked back to the others who looked just as stunned as she felt. "Wait, what?"

"Robin," Jonathan began, speaking slowly as if he wasn't sure she understood. "We're giving you the chance to answer any questions. About. Tammy..."

Robin nodded. "And I really appreciate it guys. Like, really, no sarcasm. I get that you weren't lying about the NDAs and all that, at least."

"But..." Nancy prompted.

Robin rolled her eyes. "The way I see it, knowing's more problems than it's worth right now. And I'm...over it." She frowned. "I think. I mean, I'm still upset about Tammy, but not you guys...Steve getting messed up is something to do with it isn't it?"

"It makes the most sense," Barb admitted as Nancy and Jonathan nodded along. "Though honestly, we don't know."

Robin thought about that. "...ok. I lied. I have one question. I heard you guys talk about a gorgon. Like the Medusa? Is that why you were at school that night and there were all those rumors of a fight after the shit went down in November?" It was a question open-ended enough that Nancy could simply answer with a hesitant nod. Robin looked down at her homework. "And that's why King Steve and "Creep Byers" are suddenly best friends after duking it out in the halls. OK." With all the reading between the lines from the talks over coffee with Callahan, she could make a reasonable guess as to what kind of a mess November had been. She took a breath and looked up. "I'm going to trust you guys and give you the benefit of the doubt. I crossed some lines last month too. But, can I ask you guys one more thing? Something selfish. Next time something happens...I want in."

"You want...wait, uhhh..." Nancy tried to think of a warning that would be convincing enough.

"This gorgon thing is why Carol and Tammy and all those other people are dead right?" That got Robin cautious nods from the others. "I want to help next time." Maybe this way, she could do Tammy some justice.

Jonathan looked at the others. "It's too dangerous, right? Robin, we almost died!"

"Jonathan!" Nancy hissed trying to cut him off.

Robin's face somehow sobered further as she watched them. Barb sighed and snapped her fingers, hushing the argument that threatened to break out between the other two. "It's not like you two took "no" for an answer when it was Hopper and Joyce making us stand down. If Robin's anything like us, telling her no will make her more reckless. You really want to risk that? With that thing from the school loose hell knows where?" It was an effective point, prodding at their own foolhardiness that made them shut up.

At least Jonathan did. "Barb, you can't be serious!" Nancy exclaimed.

"She already overheard and saw enough. And she's meeting us halfway. You heard her. How can we not say no? We were going to tell her anyways, you think she was going to just say "ok" and just leave? Last time, we needed all the help we got and we barely got away with taking two demogorgons down. El's...not around these days, so what if there's more?"

"Not to mention," Jonathan pointed out, "we don't need another loose cannon like Steve freaking out about Carol."

Nancy frowned, vividly remembering the way he went to attack the Demogorgon in the Upside Down and not liking the thought of that with Robin.

Robin sat up straight. "Look, I promise. I won't go do anything crazy if you guys promise I can help do something." The visceral need to do act was still there in her bones, aching to make *something* of her life before another thing came out of left field to kill her like Tammy. Like all the other gays and lesbians with AIDS, disappearing one by one. Not to mention, with Callahan involved in all this, there was no way Robin was going to let her new gay mentor face these things alone. Lucky for her that these three were a lot more amendable to the idea than Callahan had been the one time she asked.

Robin kept very still as Nancy turned back to her. The girl opened her mouth, then slumped and nodded. "Ok. We'll promise to let you know."

As she examined the dark expressions on the other's faces, Robin wondered: if this was a victory, why didn't it feel like it? "And I'll let you know if I hear about anything weird."

Tentative arrangement settled, Robin bowed out for the evening. She left ahead of Jonathan who had to get to his part time job soon. While he and Nancy went to wake Steve, Barb warmed up the leftovers Flo had left them.

She put them out with a fresh glass of water as Steve staggered into the room on Nancy's arm. "Oh...Steve," Barb whispered.

"Yeah. I know it looks...bad. Sorry, I, uhm, made you guys worry."

"Stop apologizing Steve," Jonathan was surprised how many times he had to say that to Steve over the last month. Even considering the Demogorgon and losing Carol, Steve was practically a completely different person from the start of November two months ago.

"No more apologies please," Nancy briskly instructed as they sat him down.

Jonathan looked at the clock, then sighed and just sat down. This was worth being late. "I gotta go, but you owe us an explanation Steve. Will was worried when you didn't show up for New Years." Actually, he had been disappointed when Steve hadn't shown up on New Years. Will had been so excited to show Steve the picture he drew of the fighter character he and the older boy had come up with the last time Jonathan and his mother asked Steve to watch Will while they had work.

"Shit. I completely forgot," Steve shrank in on himself only for Nancy to hug him.

"You forgot," Jonathan shrugged. "It's ok. None of us perfect. Will'll be glad just to hear you're OK. He was freaking out he gave you like, I don't know, Upside Down cooties."

Steve nodded, wincing at the throbbing in his head as he made up his mind. "I'll come by and apologize to him."

"I'll hold you to that Harrington."

Once he had eaten half of the meatloaf and nearly all of his baked greens, Nancy acquiesced to Steve refusing the next forkful, holding his stomach.

"Ok." After a beat Nancy asked, "Steve what happened?"

"Was it Perkins?" Barb was quick to ask. Since he became the new leader of her convocation, Barb spent more than one sleepless night after waking up from a Demogorgon nightmare. On those nights, the only thing that she could think of was how to stop the monstrous Father Perkins looming in her mind from hunting down Steve. The



dread over that mental image was better than the cold fear that a Demogorgon might come out the wall of her room and end her then and there.

“Was it Carol?” asked Nancy sympathetically, well aware how much it consumed his brain space these days when he was upset. Her nightmares of the Demogorgons from two months ago were starting to fade. Instead, she wrestled with her own guilty dreams of Carol, half eaten, rising out of Steve’s old pool like a zombie.

“No...” Steve shrank into himself. “It’s not that. It’s just embarrassing...”

Barb reached out and patted his arm gently. “Steve, anything that made you go on a bender isn’t something we’re going to laugh at you about.”

“We’re here for you,” Nancy promised as Jonathan gave him a serious nod.

Steve looked down at his plate. “...Mom and dad didn’t come home for Christmas,” he said softly.

“...Oh,” said both girls at once as Jonathan crossed his arms, expression thunderous. “Steve,” Nancy chorused with Barb’s softer “Oh, Steve,” as he hung his head.

“It’s the first year since they, you know the screaming match about divorce I mentioned when I was younger right, Nancy?” His girlfriend nodded and rested a hand on his arm. “After that I used to worry about this. That’s they’d go off on a business trip and never come back. Fuck,” he whispered softly.

“They just abandoned you?” Barb couldn’t imagine it. Christmas last year had been smothering. Her mother had wanted to spend every moment together baking, cooking, even making Barb take pictures with that stupid inflatable Santa like she was eight again. Thinking about it now, she felt guilty. At the time, she wished her parents would just leave her alone.

Steve laughed harshly at the question. “They sent me a check for a

grand. Fuckers.” He slumped against his chair. “They didn’t even add a card.”

Nancy made a sympathetic sound and rubbed his arm. “I’m sorry, I didn’t even realize. I should’ve been here.”

Steve shrugged. “Spent it with the Byers.” Jonathan backed that up with a nod as he ran a hand through his hair selfconsciously. “Used the money to buy them some nice presents. Sweet camera for Jonathan. Thought my mother would hate that.”

“Then you drank yourself silly?” Barb asked.

“Can’t celebrate New Years without champagne!” Steve mocked brightly. “Oh! Ow, my head,” he winced and clutched his temple.

“More water. And bed,” Nancy instructed as Barb started clearing the table. Once he downed a glass, she pulled Steve to his feet on one side as Jonathan helped with the other. With Steve settled in his bedroom, Nancy turned out the lights and came out.

“Well, it wasn’t as bad as we thought it could be,” Nancy said as they gathered their stuff.

“Nancy, he’s still super upset about it,” Barb frowned, finding Nancy a tad flippant all things considered.

“It is! I’m just. Glad it wasn’t Carol again. Or the monster,” Nancy sighed. Jonathan nodded at that, similarly relieved that it wasn’t more Upside Down crap at least.

Barb wasn’t privy to the nightmares Nancy shared with Steve these days. As far as she knew, nobody talked about their nightmares. She wasn’t aware if the others even had any. They all knew each other’s tempers though, and they were more willing to overlook bad moods or help cover each other on days when one of them walked in looking like the walking dead from lack of sleep. It wasn’t a perfect system, but they were getting by. One day to the next, month by month. Hopefully they could make it through this year too.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

And that's it for these. Longer than I expected, but I really enjoyed just writing all the different characters interacting. I'm pretty far into Season 2 already, but I need a buffer so updates will still just be weekly. The next installment will be posted in a week as "The Second Difference - Numbers." Thanks for reading!